Belonging in a Safe Place:
Searching for a Home in Christian Community After Childhood Sexual Abuse

A thesis presented for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
at the University of Aberdeen

Elizabeth Lynch
BA (Hons) University of Durham
MA University of Nottingham

2011

Declaration

- This thesis has been composed by the candidate.
- This thesis has not been accepted in any previous application for a degree.
- The work for this thesis has been done by the candidate.
- All quotations have been distinguished by quotation marks and the sources of information have been specifically acknowledged.

Elizabeth Lynch

Para Ángel, Mayra, Gabriela, y todos los niños de los ‘Hogares de Amor’ en Cochabamba, Bolivia.

Summary

This thesis presents an exploration of the possibility of women's past experiences of childhood sexual abuse having the status of belonging in Christian communities. This is the result of the observation that in literature and in practice, these experiences are regarded and treated in a way that distances and alienates them from the core values and practices of these places. The thesis is both critical and constructive in exploring how past experiences of childhood sexual abuse can be understood and articulated in ways that facilitate their exclusion from or their belonging in Christian communities.

Prioritising the perspectives of women who have been sexually abused as children, and recognising the vulnerability of these perspectives when placed alongside more dominant views, I situate the study among feminist theologies that allow the topic to be explored in such a way that allocates a place of significance to voices and perspectives that are not heard or respected in other locations. Having outlined the roots of the questions I am asking, I set out the features of my location and approach and discuss my choice and interpretation of sources (chapter one). Following a critique and rejection of the dominant discourse of psychiatry as a vocabulary in which the significance of childhood sexual abuse is commonly understood (chapter two), I allow space for a detailed reading of three autobiographical accounts of experiences of childhood sexual abuse (chapter three). From here I develop two theologically significant ideas emerging from these accounts, to show the possibility of articulating and understanding these experiences in terms that belong in Christian communities (chapter four).

I then turn to look at how the issue of childhood sexual abuse has been treated in Christian communities (chapter five), exploring the long silences of churches on this subject, and explaining how this impedes the extent to which women who have been sexually abused might be able to belong in these communities. I argue for the importance of hearing these women's voices alongside those of others so that they can belong in Christian communities alongside those who are more commonly heard. From this perspective of considering how these experiences belong in Christian community, I turn to look at the way that the question of forgiveness is understood and approached in relation to childhood sexual abuse (chapter six). I argue that although speaking of

forgiveness is in theory a way of speaking about childhood sexual abuse that connects this experience with a theological concept that is meaningful in Christian communities, unless the specifics of the language of forgiveness are carefully and thoughtfully presented, in fact speaking of forgiveness may result in further alienation rather than belonging.

I conclude (chapter seven) by suggesting that currently it is problematic to suppose that the formally structured churches are places in which experiences of childhood sexual abuse could safely belong. Finally, I point to the real possibility of these experiences finding a home in Christian community outside formal churches; that in spite of the churches' failures and slow responses, it is possible for women's past experiences of childhood sexual abuse to belong safely in Christian community.

Acknowledgements

(To the tune of “Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious”, with apologies to the Sherman brothers)

Super-folk-who-helped-me-through-the-PhD-frustration,
They deserve some medals and a big loud celebration,
So I now will honour them in lyrical creation,
Super-folk-who-helped-me-through-the-PhD-frustration.

Looking at the research of the thesis first of all,
The AHRC’s money meant this work was possible.
John Swinton supervised it, and for this I thank him here,
He gave guidance, kicking, helpful words, an interested ear.

Super-help-with-feedback-reading-drafts-giving-corrections,
John Webster read the whole thing, and gave valuable reflections,
I’m grateful too for Esther McIntosh and her suggestions,
Super-help-with-feedback-reading-drafts-giving-corrections.

Important to this process was the chance to talk things through,
Discussing thoughts and questions was a helpful thing to do.
In chatting with Mark Davidson, I processed some ideas,
Lamented too-slow progress, and exchanged sarcastic jeers.

In...
Super-theological-pastoral-conversation
James Gregory’s been brilliant, and so has Ian Aitken,
For talking through ideas and church rehabilitation,
Super-theological-pastoral-conversation.

[You know, you can start to over-think it, which could be called “discourse analysis”, but that’s going a bit too far, don’t you think? Indubitably...]

Studying this topic's not an easy thing to do,
I've been to some dark places, but my friends have been there too.
I'm grateful to McGarrys, and for Brownlees, Reads and Birds,
For Vaughan and Tanja Wyllie – you have all been quite superb.

You did…
Super-chocolate-pizza-fish-and-chips-and-curry-feasting,
Walks along the beach, and cups of coffee never ceasing,
Evenings drinking fancy drinks, our consciousness depleting,
Super-chocolate-pizza-fish-and-chips-and-curry-feasting.

Finally I'm grateful to those kids both far and near,
Who've given hugs and sang and danced, and helped to keep things real.
Our kids in Cochabamba are a joy to know and see,
As they grow from small sick babies to the people they can be.

Super-baby-cuddles-singing-playing-keeps-me-going,
I never would have stuck with this, if it were not for knowing,
It matters that you're safe and loved for all the time you're growing,
Super-baby-cuddles-singing-playing-keeps-me-going.

Contents

Chapter One
Writing in a Safe Place

Introducing the Questions

The personal roots of the study - A matter of belonging

Around eleven years ago, feeling increasingly alienated in a church culture that, from where I was sitting, favoured the interests of particular groups of people to which I did not belong, I began to question what I perceived to be a culture that encouraged denial of all sorts of kinds of suffering, pain, oppression, and injustice. Driving my alienation and questioning was my own identity as a young woman who had been sexually abused as a child, and who had not once heard the words "child sexual abuse" spoken in any church. Now, approaching the age of thirty, and having attended churches regularly for almost all of my life, I have heard the issue of sexual abuse addressed in church in a meaningful way once. Once, in thirty years.

It is possible that I have been extraordinarily unlucky. It is possible that each and every church I have attended, as I have relocated around the country for work and study, has been one of those very unusual churches that has chosen not to speak of child sexual abuse. It is possible that while I have sat in these denying churches, all other churches around me have spoken openly about these issues, and that due to my unfortunate choice of location, I have missed it. These things are possible. But if I have been extraordinarily unlucky, so too have a very great number of others – others with whom I have had personal conversations, others who have written books, papers and reports I have read, others who have appeared on radio and television programmes speaking of frustrations sounding very similar to my own.[1] At some point, extraordinary becomes ordinary.

When I first began to question the culture of denial that I found frustrating in my own church, my questions were non-specific. I questioned the denial of child sexual abuse without mentioning the words – the nature of my own questioning being itself a sad part of this denial. A vague questioning about the denial of suffering eventually

[1] A number of these will be referenced in chapter five, when addressing the issue of churches' silence on the issue of child sexual abuse.

became the more specific and bolder questioning about the denial of the experiences, insights, and challenges of people who have been sexually abused. Several years ago, I began to question and challenge when I heard preaching on those Bible passages that depict God as inflicting sexual violence[2], when the preacher did not acknowledge just how disturbing this is and the nature of the questions it raises, nor the particular impact of this on a significant proportion of the congregation. I began to challenge the practice of comfortably referring to God as Father, when those doing so seldom acknowledged the reality of abusive fathers and father-figures, nor made proportional use of other ways of addressing God. I began to challenge assumptions I so often heard in churches about the role of submission in Christian life – assumptions that did not seem to involve the recognition that to preach submission to all people uniformly was to counsel those in certain situations to allow others to abuse them. In all these challenges, I was beginning to move from a state of silence into a speech that I hoped and believed had the potential to occupy a place of significance within a theological and church community.

Sadly, this has never happened. This speech never occupied a place of significance within any church community because those with the power to allow it a place refused, either actively or passively, to do so. The result for me has been a movement back into silence, at least in relation to church communities. Regardless of the strength of its content, no argument, perspective, insight or challenge is plausible as long as those with the power to allow it to be heard decide that they will not.

For me, church now is much the same place it was eleven years ago, when the questioning first began – it is a place in which I am alienated and effectively silent. It is a place that consistently wounds me because of its continued denial and insensitivity, but nevertheless in which I find ways to remain a part because of the glimpses that it still gives, in all its imperfections, of being the community of the people of God.

While being silent and silenced in the church, I have found ways outside the more organised church structures to place my experiences of abuse into the Christian community in such a way that they have a place in this community, even if this is never acknowledged by the community as it exists in the form of organised church. The three published accounts of childhood sexual abuse that are summarised in chapter three and

[2] Jeremiah 13: 22, 26-27, Ezekiel 16:37-42, Hosea 2, Nahum 3:5-7, Revelation 17:16

considered in more depth in chapter four have constituted a significant part of this process. While my church background and context gave me no language and no place to speak these experiences, the writings of these authors (among others) allowed me to begin to articulate experiences which had been unspoken, and to situate these experiences among those of others. Remaining outside the formal church structures, my own experiences also found expression and belonging within smaller and informal Christian community, as well as in ministry with abandoned and abused babies and children in central Bolivia.

In all these ways and very different places, my own experiences of abuse have been 'spoken' on the outskirts of Christian communities, even if at the centre of the community they have never been given a voice. This situation may not seem ideal, but is perhaps the most I can realistically hope for. It may also be the case that the Christian life is lived most authentically at the margins of the Christian community, rather than at its privileged and powerful centre.

It is in the context of these personal struggles, frustrations and disappointments that this thesis has been designed and carried out, and the personal context has undoubtedly and undeniably determined the shape and content of the study. The central question has emerged as that of how women's past experiences of childhood sexual abuse can have the status of belonging in Christian communities.[3] This incorporates two interrelated questions – one concerning meaning and the other concerning voice. Firstly, there is the question of what kinds of meanings experiences of abuse can take on – how these meanings can be *meanings that belong* in Christian communities, in the sense of being expressed in a language that is relevant in the lives of these communities. Secondly, there is the question of how those who have been abused can speak their experiences so that they can be *people who belong* in Christian communities, in the sense of their lives and histories being spoken among the lives and histories of others in these communities.

[3] The decision to focus specifically on the experiences of women, rather than men too, who have been sexually abused is largely the result of the fact that the thesis arises out of and is constantly influenced by personal experience. Given this fact, it did not seem fitting to attempt to discuss too the experiences of men. It is also the case that differing social pressures on men and women are such that living as a man in the aftermath of childhood sexual abuse could be a very different experience to that of living as a woman with similar past experiences (an issue that I will return to later in this chapter). Consequently, while acknowledging the importance of researching the significance of men's experiences of childhood sexual abuse, the way that I have approached the study means that it would not have been appropriate for me to have attempted this here.

In speaking of belonging, there is the preliminary issue of whether there is a space at all in Christian communities for past experiences of sexual abuse. If these experiences are excluded, either by being thought of as having no particular meaning that matters here, or by not being voiced at all here, then clearly they do not belong. A necessary part of belonging is simply being permitted some place within the community. Beyond this though, there is the question of precisely how a space is carved out for them so that it is not simply a matter of such experiences being allocated a location in Christian communities, but of these experiences being respected and valued in their potential to engage significantly with that which is considered to matter in this place. To belong in Christian community would then be more than just not being excluded from it, but actually being welcome in it. So although part of what is meant by belonging is that something or someone (in this case the experience of abuse and those who have experienced it) not be excluded or isolated, to belong would be much more than this, and would involve their being cherished as being a significant part of this place, as their having a contribution to make, and of their being missed if they were not there. They would be connected within this place, would accompany and be accompanied by this community, so that these past experiences truly have a home in Christian community.

When I began this period of research, my intention was to produce a piece of work in which I would bring my own experiences into intellectual conversation, and that the thesis would remain engaged throughout with the real experiences without which it would never have been written. It has been one of my biggest frustrations over the past three years of research and writing that it has not been possible for me to do this; that the criteria I have had to meet and the academic customs I have had to follow in order to fulfil the requirements of a PhD just did not fit with the nature of my topic, and nor were they a great deal of help in addressing the questions I was dealing with. I frequently felt that the need to satisfy certain academic customs was pulling me away from the reality of the experience at the heart of the study, and that I was betraying my topic by writing in a way that to me felt unnaturally abstract. I also felt that writing about the question of how experiences of abuse can belong, but doing so in a way that alienated my own experiences from the process, created a very odd dissonance. I did fight back a little, but my limited acts of rebellion are mostly contained to the very beginning and very end of the thesis; what is in between is far more abstract that I had expected or hoped for. This

has been greatly disappointing to me, and I suspect that had I been writing the thesis at a different time, or just in a different location, these experiences would have been part of the surface discussion rather than being buried beneath it. As it is, as I wrote the different parts of the thesis, and when I read through it now, I was and am aware for myself what the experiences are that have informed each part of it and influenced its shape, even if this is not made explicit in the finished product.

The shape of the thesis

Located in a Christian context, my concern was with how past experiences of childhood sexual abuse are interpreted and dealt with in this context, specifically asking how the ways in which they are interpreted and dealt with either facilitates or impedes the status of belonging that these experiences rightfully have. With the goal as that of establishing how experiences of abuse can belong in Christian communities, the thesis moves through several stages.

This first chapter, having introduced the questions to be explored, and the context in which those questions arose, sets out the intellectual location of the study, situating the study within feminist theologies and setting out in detail my approach to the study, unpacking four key features of a feminist approach with which the study is undertaken. The chapter then turns to explaining the rationale behind the choice of sources that shaped the content of the thesis, and then discussing the issues involved in the process of interpreting these sources.

The task of chapter two is to explore the discourse of psychiatry in interpreting the meaning given to women's experiences of childhood sexual abuse. Identified as the dominant vocabulary with which these experiences are understood, the aim of the chapter is to explain my decision to reject this discourse as one that enables me to address the question at the heart of the thesis. The chapter gives an overview of what is said by the literature that makes up the psychiatric discourse on child sexual abuse, and then develops a critical evaluation of this literature. The chapter looks first at the issues raised by applying psychiatric diagnoses to women who have been abused, calling into question the practice of re-naming the experiences of abused women according to a discourse that in general is alien to them, and is one which focuses negative attention on these women

rather than on the abusive environments in which they are located. The chapter then turns to a critique of the exercising of power within the discourse of psychiatry, arguing that psychiatric diagnosis can itself be seen as (and experienced as) abusive, and advocating noncompliance with the psychiatric discourse as an active resistance to further abuse. Rejecting the psychiatric discourse clears the way for the remainder of the study to have at its core the voices of women who have been abused.

Chapter three is then a summary of three women's written accounts of their own experiences of childhood sexual abuse and their developing interpretations and understandings of these experiences over the years that followed. The task of this chapter is primarily descriptive, setting out in context the ideas that will be worked with later in the study.

Developing from this, chapter four addresses the first part of the central question of the thesis, presenting a reflection on two theologically significant images emerging from the accounts presented in chapter three, in order to show how experiences of childhood sexual abuse can be spoken of in theological terms, so that they are seen as having meanings that belong in Christian communities. The chapter begins by setting out why and how these images are to be discussed, before taking each in turn and unpacking them in a way that produces a conversation that provides in-depth reflection on the significance of experiences of abuse, and does so in a very deliberate theological vocabulary as a way of showing that these experiences are significant in a place in which this vocabulary is spoken. While the meanings that are developed in this chapter are not intended to be seen as *the* meanings that should be attributed to childhood sexual abuse, the chapter shows how it is possible for the experience of abuse to be articulated and understood in ways that belong in Christian communities.

In chapter five, I turn to address the second part of the central question – that of how women who have been abused in childhood can be people who belong in Christian communities. In addressing this question, I look at ways in which the issue of child sexual abuse has tended to be treated within more formal church structures. The chapter moves from a point at which experiences of childhood sexual abuse have no status of belonging in churches, towards locating these experiences within the life of the church. The chapter begins by looking at the movement of the churches away from the silence

and denial that had been commonplace with regards to child sexual abuse. It then moves to look at aspects of church life and speech that function to bring to speech women who have been abused, or conversely to drive them further into silence. The chapter then explains the significance of the voices of abused women being heard within the church if these experiences are to belong in this place and be of service to church communities.

Chapter six then looks specifically the ways in which forgiveness is understood and practiced, discussing this with the question in mind of how the way that the issue of forgiveness is dealt with influences abused women's belonging in Christian communities. Having argued in chapters four and five for the importance of speaking in theological terms about childhood sexual abuse, and for the importance of abused women's voices being part of this conversation, chapter six shows how in fact even when Christian communities do speak in theological terms about abuse, this by no means secures belonging in these places for those who have been abused. Looking at beliefs and practices through this particular lens of belonging, the chapter critiques ways in which forgiveness has been taught and understood, the chapter argues that forgiveness is of secondary importance to questions of justice, and can only be understood authentically and meaningfully alongside a commitment to justice.

In chapter seven, I bring together the two sides of the research question, and conclude by considering how past experiences of childhood sexual abuse can belong in Christian communities despite churches' failures to function in a welcoming way towards women who have been abused.

Locating the Study

Identifying feminist theologies as a "safe place"

The answer to the question of where the intellectual location of the study should be has been very much determined by the consideration expressed in the title of this chapter, and has involved identifying an area of theology in which this study could be written safely. A safe place in which to write on the issue of belonging and speaking in the aftermath of childhood sexual abuse would be a place in which there was the opportunity for voices of abused women to be expressed, and placed in experimental

conversation with theological categories, without the worry at this stage of being overpowered by a dominant discourse. It would therefore be a place in which more dominant voices are engaged with only when there is an acute awareness and caution regarding their power to overwhelm, to silence, and to speak for those who they regard as conversation subjects rather than conversation partners.

A safe place in which to write would also be a place that allowed for dominant discourses on abuse to be critiqued without the critique being silenced by the discourse with which it was attempting to engage. It would involve using tools that are not those that constitute the methodologies of these more powerful discourses, but which are selected and designed specifically to allow for the possibility of re-examining these discourses from perspectives seldom heard or respected within it.

A safe place in which to write would be one in which others were writing in ways that spoke into my own questions constructively and not dismissively. It would be a place in which others were writing with an appreciation for the importance of such a perspective, and with a commitment to speaking with and challenging those perspectives in ways that did not seek to disprove or reject them, but which worked with them to give rise to new understandings.

The study is located in the area of feminist theology. What this means and entails will be discussed in more detail in the following section of this chapter, but before going into the details of what is involved in a feminist approach, I want first to look at the theological significance of taking this kind of approach to a study that raises questions about belonging for women who have been sexually abused.

In her book, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretations of the Church*, Letty Russell describes feminist theologies as "advocacy theologies", stating that "what makes them distinctive is articulation of the experience of women struggling for full liberation in community."[4] She continues, saying that feminist theologies involve the presupposition that the experiences of these "communities of struggle" are the lens through which we understand and reinterpret scripture and tradition. The experiences of

[4] Letty M. Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), pp.24-25

communities of struggle are also the test of whether a particular methodology makes sense.[5]

The community of struggle that Russell has in mind when writing is that of all women struggling against patriarchy and injustice.[6] In the context of this study, the community of struggle under consideration is obviously narrower than this, and is much more specifically those women who are located in churches and who have been sexually abused as children. The struggle of this community is nuanced and intensified by the fact that those in this group have been wounded in particular ways, and wounded more than many, as a result of patriarchy and injustice. When looking at scripture and tradition, both will be understood and reinterpreted through this very particular lens, with the question in mind of how might this passage/belief/practice fit with the experiences of a woman who has been sexually abused? That is, how might it speak hope or understanding into this situation, or how might it function to judge, to overlook, or to silence?

Choosing to be biased

The approach I am taking is unashamedly biased. In the voices I am choosing to listen to, I am very consciously giving priority to perspectives of women who have been abused. My position is in a sense extreme. I am not trying to give balanced understandings or interpretations; I am very much favouring particular perspectives to the deliberate neglect of others. There is, however, a theological precedent for this kind of approach, when the topic is one that concerns people who may only have a chance to be heard if they are regarded in a way that gives them preference over others.

Russell identifies what she calls a "critical principle of interpretation" that she characterises as being a focus of feminist theologies. This critical principle of interpretation takes on a particular nature in the context of her own focus on feminist ecclesiology. In this context, this principle is presented as what she calls a "table principle"[7], and at the heart of this principle is inclusion and hospitality. The table

[5] Russell, *Church in the Round*, pp.24-25
[6] Russell, *Church in the Round*, p.25
[7] Russell, *Church in the Round*, p.25

principle "looks for ways that God reaches out to include all those whom society and religion have declared outsiders and invites them to gather round God's table of hospitality."[8] This principle favours one group – those who have been declared as outsiders – in that it extends an invitation to the table specifically to them. The table principle does not involve extending an invitation to those who have not been declared outsiders. This is not to say that "insiders" are uninvited – the table principle does not involve issuing an eviction notice to any particular group – but the implication is that the invitation is not extended to these people because they already know themselves to be invited.

Russell gives as the theological rationale underpinning this table principle, the fact that Jesus' teaching is both "that all persons are created by God and are welcome in God's household", and that his teaching "is constantly directed towards the invitation of those who are the rejected ones of society, those on the margin."[9] It is those who have been rejected who need this invitation. Extending the invitation into the household to those already sitting comfortably in the front room would be futile. Extending the invitation to all equally would not communicate to the rejected and marginalized that this really does mean them too. Extending the invitation in a way that expresses a preference for these people is necessary if they are to be welcomed and free to participate in the household of God.

Russell anticipates the 'Galatians 3:28' response that this division between centre and margin does not exist in Christ, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Her reply to such a criticism is that it is by favouring those who are in practice in the churches still rejected and sidelined, that the churches begin to be communities that point to and embody this truth. To draw a connection with liberation theology (a connection that Russell does draw in identifying the similarity between her "table principle" and the theme of the "view from below" developed by Gustavo Gutiérrez in *The Power of the Poor in History*), one interpretation of liberation theologies' "preferential option for the poor" could be that exercising a preference for an oppressed group means that this group may then begin to take on a status that the rich already enjoy. A level playing field, with all perspectives regarded as

[8] Russell, *Church in the Round*, p.25
[9] Russell, *Church in the Round*, p.25. All Bible quotations are taken from the TNIV translation.

equally important, would not allow for the perspectives of the oppressed to be significant, because the power discrepancies between the rich and the poor are such that on a level playing field the voices of the poor would not be able to challenge those voices that have exercised power over them, and whose concerns have always been prioritised at the expense of the concerns of the poor.

Becoming a community in which there is neither slave nor free, male nor female, in a context in which the free and the male are in practice privileged, it is first necessary to shift the balance more than halfway. By doing this, by favouring those who are often in practice not favoured, theological discourse and church communities take on eschatological significance. Such a community, Russell states, in its faith and its struggle, is "working to anticipate God's new Creation by becoming partners with those who are at the margins of church and society."[10]

My approach in this study of prioritising the voices and perspectives of women who have been abused, and deliberately locating my study among feminist theologies as a context that allows for this preferential treatment, can be viewed in a similar way. The perspectives of women who have been sexually abused are not one collection of perspectives existing on a level playing field with equal status to all others. As will be discussed in the following section of this chapter, the fact that they are the perspectives of women reduces their status on the theological playing field. The fact that they are the perspectives of sexually abused women reduces their status further still. To present these perspectives in a way that placed them among others as if all these perspectives could converse in a way that was respectful, fair and healthy, would be a denial of the way things are.

To give a somewhat dispassionate analogy, giving unashamed priority to the voices of women who have been sexually abused functions like a golf handicap. These voices, given theoretical equal status in theological conversation, would in practice be drowned out by voices that have been drowning them out for centuries. Giving them preference and priority means that they have a chance to be heard and to challenge those voices that have been overpowering them and preventing them from being heard. This is all the more essential when the concern driving this study is the exclusion and silence of

[10] Russell, *Church in the Round*, p.12

abused women, and their movement from this place of isolated silence towards speech that occupies of a place of significance and belonging in Christian community.

Having situated the study in the location of feminist theologies, and given a theological perspective on this location, the following section will unpack in more detail exactly what is involved in the feminist approach I am choosing to take.

Characterising a Feminist Approach

In her essay, "Women, Rationality and Theology", Jane Shaw points out that there is not a "static, whole thing" that is feminism, but that there are multiple feminisms that have emerged over its short history, "feminism has constantly changed over time, and in response to the concerns of the women (and men) who have defined it."[11] Similarly, Mary McClintock Fulkerson, in her book *Changing the Subject*, asserts, "feminist method requires a plurality of subjects and a plurality of interpretations."[12] Providing a 'definition' of feminism would likely result in a statement either so narrow that it would only recognise certain perspectives, while excluding others, or so broad it would verge on being meaningless. Given that the term is understood in such diverse ways by different authors at different points in time over its short history, a blanket definition would be naïve and misleading.

An alternative to an attempt at a definition is to identify aspects of feminisms or feminist methods that are pertinent to researching the experience of childhood sexual abuse, and to consider how these aspects might be adopted in the context of this study. The following statement is intended then not as a definition or a summary of feminism, but as a way into exploring various facets of a feminist approach that will be important to this research:

[11] Jane Shaw, "Women, Rationality and Theology" in Daphne Hampson (ed.), *Swallowing a Fishbone? Feminist Theologians Debate Christianity* (London: SPCK, 1996), p.51
[12] Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Changing the Subject: Women's Discourses and Feminist Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), p.15

> **Feminism is a means chosen by women of situating themselves in reality in such a way that they are able to give a new shape to their 'woman-condition', that is, to what it means to live life as a woman in a culture, a society.[13]**

In order to arrive at a fuller understanding of the features of the approaches I intend to draw on, I will focus on four aspects of this description – feminism as a *means*, feminism as an approach *chosen by women*, feminism as a *re-shaping of meaning*, and feminism as *socially situated* – and consider how each of these aspects will help to create the location and approach for this study.

Feminism as a means

A feminist approach is not intended as an academic perspective – one interesting way of looking at the world – it is intended to *do* something to the world. As a means, it is motivated by the goal of social and political transformation. Reit Bons-Storm describes feminism as a "strategic tool, used to transform the basic value system and its notions about women and men."[14] It is not to be seen as a theoretical ideology, but as a way of achieving change. As an example that has specific reference to the topic of child sexual abuse, Louise Armstrong's classic text, *Rocking the Cradle of Sexual Politics: What Happened When Women Said Incest*, discusses the consequences of a feminist's speaking out about and raising awareness of the prevalence of incest and its widespread denial. Of the uproar that followed her original publication on incest,[15] she writes that many people, searching for a positive comment to make of it, named her achievement as having ensured that, "at least we're talking about it now." Her reply implies that she had intended much more than this: "Yes. We certainly are. But it was not our intention merely to start a long conversation."[16]

A feminist approach aims at effecting change by examining the power relations and assumptions that underpin a social or cultural structure. It draws attention to these assumptions, and critiques them, with the intention of reform. Bons-Storm states that as

---

[13] Rosi Braidotti, *Beelden van Leegte*, (Kampen: Kok Agora, 1991), p.161, cited in Riet Bons-Storm, *The Incredible Woman: Listening to Women's Silences in Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), p.24

[14] Bons-Storm, *The Incredible Woman*, p.24

[15] Louse Armstrong, *Kiss Daddy Goodnight* (New York: Hawthorne Books, 1978)

[16] Louse Armstrong, *Rocking the Cradle of Sexual Politics: What Happened When Women Said Incest* (London: Women's Press, 1996), p.7

a political stance, feminism "critiques the values of a society, analyzes the power structure of a society, and develops strategies to transform that society."[17]

Feminist theology is conducted in a location in which women are oppressed by the structures in which they are situated. It recognises the injustice of these structures, and, in critiquing them, looks beneath them to the values that have formed the bases of these structures. So, far from merely starting a long conversation, a feminist approach seeks to critique the very terms that would be used in conversation, identifying features of the language and features of the way it is spoken that underpin the oppression of women. As Shoshana Felman writes,

> Women's oppression exists not only in the material, practical organization of economic, social, medical, and political structures, but also in the very foundations of logos, reasoning, and articulation – in the subtle linguistic procedures and in the logical processes through which meaning itself is produced.[18]

As these features are identified, a feminist approach sets out to resist them and to transform them. Rebecca Chopp's book *The Power to Speak* addresses the need for transformation of those linguistic practices which both reflect and exacerbate the silencing of women, or their being forced into a certain kind of speech – one that reinforces their oppression. Chopp writes,

> Until we change the values and hidden rules that run through present linguistic practices, social codes, and psychic orderings, women, persons of color, and other oppressed groups will be forced – by the language, discourses, and practices available to them – into conforming to ongoing practices, to babbling nonsense, or to not speaking at all. Such transformation is how I understand the movement of feminist theology.[19]

By looking "with open eyes and an open mind"[20] (that is, opening the gaze beyond one that accepts the language and interpretations that commonly make up a conversation on child sexual abuse, or one that accepts the dominance of voices permitted in this conversation), at the social situation in which child sexual abuse is perpetrated, it becomes impossible not to see how much injustice and suffering is caused by an imbalance of power on the basis of assumptions made about the meaning of

---

[17] Bons-Storm, *The Incredible Woman*, p.25
[18] Shoshana Felman, "Women and Madness: The Critical Fallacy" in *Diacritics*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (Winter, 1975), p.4 cited in Bons-Storm, *The Incredible Woman*, p.25
[19] Rebecca Chopp, *The Power to Speak* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), p.6
[20] Bons-Storm, *The Incredible Woman*, p.25

gender. A feminist approach will draw together analyses of social and ecclesial structures with analyses of the ideological assumptions beneath them, and aim to critique, challenge, and transform, whenever these assumptions work themselves out in ways that give rise to injustice.

Speaking specifically, the transformation aimed for in this study is primarily concerned with creating a new language and, more importantly, a new way of creating a language with which to talk about child sexual abuse. It is also concerned with locating the speaking of this language within a place of belonging so that it has significance in community.

Feminism as women's choice

As well as presenting critiques of those structures and linguistic features and practices that oppress women, challenging and proposing transformation, a feminist approach – simply by virtue of its existence – functions as an opposition to the oppression of women and the silencing of their voices and experiences. As an approach chosen by women, a feminist approach presupposes a decision to speak out against the conventions according to which certain people and experiences are silenced or re-narrated through a perspective other than that of the woman at the heart of the experience.

Writing about her experience of giving her testimony at the age of thirteen at the trial of her rapist, Martha Ramsey describes her realisation that in that context she lost her rights to her own experience, having to modify and reframe her story according to the needs and expectations of her circumstances, "I had felt that I was the natural author of this story, the right teller of it, and I was discovering now, in a silent, inchoate way, that I was not going to speak as myself to the public."[21]

This aspect of the feminist approach I am outlining will be important throughout the study, but will be of particular significance in chapter two, when I look at clinical interpretations and understandings of the impact of child sexual abuse. A concern that

[21] Martha Ramsey, *Where I Stopped: Remembering an Adolescent Rape* (San Diego; New York; London: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1995), p.84

will be developed in that chapter is that of ownership of experience, and the right to name and interpret one's own experience. A woman's exercising the right to speak for herself, and to name her own experience, is seen within a feminist approach as crucial to the formation of identity and the construction of subjectivity.[22] Exercising this choice is an act of resistance to those structures that put up barriers to women's development as subjects, which is all the more pertinent when women choose to speak on their own terms about acts of abuse – acts which take away their subjectivity.

In his book *The Wounded Storyteller*, Arthur Frank writes, "Those who have been objects of others' reports are now telling their own stories."[23] He writes with reference to stories of illness, but his statement relates with arguably even more force to stories of abuse. Women attempting to give accounts of their experiences of abuse have already been violently objectified when they were abused, so their choosing subsequently to pursue subjectivity is a powerful statement against their past treatment. It is a stance of resistance against allowing a more powerful person to possess rights of interpretation over their experience. Frank describes as an ethical act the telling of one's own story in circumstances in which such stories have not previously been heard. Of those who have previously been objects of the stories of others, he claims that as they now tell their own stories, "they define the ethic of our times: an ethic of voice, affording each a right to speak her own truth, in her own words."[24]

Frank presents this ethic of storytelling in connection to post-colonial discourse, suggesting as a generalised description that post-colonialism can be understood as "the demand to speak rather than being spoken for and to represent oneself rather than being represented or, in the worst cases, rather than being effaced entirely."[25] When this is put in conversation with women's experiences of abuse, it helps to clarify further the significance of women's choosing to speak for themselves. Susan Brison writes of the struggle involved in "regaining one's voice, one's subjectivity, after one has been reduced to silence, to the status of an object, or, worse, made into someone else's speech,

[22] Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* (London; New York: Routledge, 1998), p.102
[23] Arthur W. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p.xiii
[24] Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, p.xiii
[25] Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, p.13

an instrument of another's agency."[26] She argues though that it is imperative that victims of sexual violence do this, for their own benefit and the benefit of a society that has much to learn from the insights these stories bring.

Resistance to the silencing of women's voices in general, and specifically the silencing of those voices trying to speak their experiences of abuse, consists partly in the mere fact of speaking out. This speaking out is all the more powerful when the woman speaking chooses the terms for her own speech. Set in and against contexts in which the details in a woman's account of abuse have meanings imposed upon them according to the more powerful discourses in which these accounts are spoken or written, in choosing a feminist approach a woman resists previous silencing in a particular way, allocating to herself both "the right to speak and the right to name."[27] This will be a significant point in the critique of dominant clinical discourses on child sexual abuse that are explored in chapter two.

Feminism as a reshaping of meaning

Discussing the role played by traditional approaches within scientific disciplines, Edward Said writes, "convention, tradition, and habit create ways of looking at a subject that transform it completely."[28] Chapter two will explore this in more detail, seeking to identify in clinical literature, conventions in ways of thinking about women who have been sexually abused, and then considering the ways that those conventions shape the meanings conferred on abused women's experiences and the status of the voices and opinions of these women – this status being something both causing and caused by these conventions. So while these issues will be discussed later on in the thesis, it is necessary at this stage to raise the issue of the role of convention, tradition and habit in attributing meaning to the experience of child sexual abuse, considering the impacts these conventions may have on the voices of abused women.

[26] Susan Brison, *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* (Princeton, N.J.; Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2003), p.55
[27] Bons-Storm, *The Incredible Woman*, p.34
[28] Edward Said, "Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies, and Community" in W. J. T. Mitchell (ed.), *The Politics of Interpretation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p.14

A feminist approach recognises that the meanings typically given to women's experiences have been determined by the conventions of a social environment in which 'problem' women have typically been silenced, disbelieved, or diagnosed – 'written off' as 'mad'. Christine Clegg writes, "It is something of a commonplace to say that too little attention to the reality of child sexual abuse and incest, in the past, sustained widespread disbelief in its existence"[29], and argues that the current danger regarding disbelief in the reality of child sexual abuse is too much attention being paid to debates around false memories and accusations. Reit Bons-Storm's significantly titled book, *The Incredible Woman*, examines how women's reports of abuse have tended to be received in a culture that prefers not to prioritise women's voices. She writes, "It is typical of patriarchal culture to call a woman with an unusual story 'mentally unbalanced' or 'mad.'"[30] Bons-Storm gives an anecdotal example of how she has seen this tendency function in practice when she relates the story of a minister calling her regarding a woman who had seen her for pastoral support,

> He said: 'Do you know that she is a psychiatric patient? You mustn't believe what she tells you. She is very disturbed.' I replied that her depression and confusion could very well be the result of disturbing experiences. But he only insisted yet again that Magdalene was a disturbed person and thus not to be believed.[31]

Paula Reavey and Sam Warner, writing about the practice of therapy with women who have been sexually abused, argue that a "too-ready acceptance" of how the effects of child sexual abuse are understood – a "shared understanding" leads to negative constraints on the possible outcomes that can be imagined for people who have been sexually abused.[32] While less obviously damaging than the events reported in Bons-Storm's anecdote, they refer to a similar convention that when a woman tells a story about sexual abuse, the result is negative judgement and treatment of her. If her story is believed, the effects of abuse are understood negatively and in terms of psychopathology. Such meanings, they argue, are attributed to the experience of child sexual abuse without the acknowledgement of the assumptions that lie at their roots, assumptions that are the result of traditions that circumscribe how child sexual abuse may be understood. The voices of the individual women are relatively irrelevant to the attributing of these

[29] Christine Clegg, "Feminist Recoveries in 'My Father's House'", *Feminist Review*, no. 61, (Spring 1999), p.69
[30] Bons-Storm, *The Incredible Woman*, p.33
[31] Bons-Storm, *The Incredible Woman*, p.140
[32] Paula Reavey and Sam Warner, "Curing Women: Child Sexual Abuse, Therapy and the Construction of Femininity", *International Journal of Critical Psychology,* vol. 3, 2001, p.50

meanings, with their words to be assimilated into traditional understandings that they play no part in constructing.

A feminist approach challenges the assumptions that lie at the roots of the practices of ascribing meaning to women's experiences. In allocating to women the task of ascribing meaning to their own experiences, a feminist approach allows for a woman to speak in her own voice, shaping and reshaping the meanings of her experiences. It allows her to do so in a way that is either not constrained by social conventions, or is at least aware of the impact of these conventions and assumptions, and so engages with them critically. It is, all in all, a more sophisticated conversation, though unlikely to be seen as such simply because of the status of the voices involved in this conversation.

It is my intention to argue and to demonstrate that, when they are allowed to be heard in a different way, women's accounts of their own experiences have the potential to tap into far richer meanings than those allowed by the dominant and traditional ways of 'understanding' sexual abuse, as well as the potential to belong (as in really be of relevance) in locations that speak a theological language. This greater depth and nature of meaning will demonstrate both the ability of women to describe their own experiences in their own voice, in their own terms, as well as highlighting ways in which dominant methods of understanding blind themselves to these deeper meanings and restrict their belonging to particular locations in particular ways. However, this richness of meaning is only one part of the issue in the re-shaping of meaning; and equally important point to make about these meanings (which links with the previous section) is simply that they are *ours*.[33] The question of who is involved in this reshaping of meaning is as important as the content of these new meanings that may be uncovered.

Feminism as socially situated

There are two issues to explore with regard to this aspect of a feminist approach, both of which have been hinted at already. The first is that a feminist approach stays in touch with, and emphasises the importance of staying in touch with, the social, cultural and political context of the researcher and the research. Carrie Doan, in her paper

[33] The matter of speaking in a communal voice will be addressed in the following section.

"'Subversive Stories and Hegemonic Tales' of Child Sexual Abuse", identifies contexts and occasions in which child sexual abuse is discussed and understood in a way that "serves to frame the problem in depoliticising, individualising, and medicalising discourses."[34] She argues that media accounts of the problem of child sexual abuse commonly "remain disconnected from the structural contexts of abuse", and so leave unexamined those constructions of family, and of masculinity and femininity, that underlie and connect with the perpetration of child sexual abuse.[35]

A feminist approach to the study of child sexual abuse, while exploring the impacts on individuals and the thoughts of individuals about experiences deeply personal to them, will remain aware and critical of the social structures in which individuals are located and in which abused is carried out.

The second point, which connects back to the identification of feminist theology as a "safe place" in which to write, is that by choosing and carving out a feminist approach, the researcher places herself in a particular kind of social environment, in which women's experiences and ideas can be heard and discussed. Thinking about where personal stories can be told, and taken seriously as a valid part of theological reflection, is an important one. Sociologist Ken Plummer makes the point that there is no point to telling a story unless it is told in a setting that is supportive, receptive, and appreciative of that story,

> Stories can be told when they can be heard…To publicly tell a story to someone who will then mock you, disbelieve you, excommunicate you, sack you, hospitalise you, imprison you or bash you bleeding senseless to the ground may be brave but it is foolhardy: it is not a fertile ground for the amplification of that story.[36]

Speaking or writing about sexual abuse in an environment that is not receptive to voices speaking of such experiences is a dangerous and probably futile activity. A woman who speaks about abuse in a place populated by individuals who doubt the value or the truth of her story runs the risk of being declared disturbed and irrational, and

[34] Carrie Doan, "'Subversive Stories and Hegemonic Tales' of Child Sexual Abuse: From Expert Legal Testimony to Television Talk Shows", International Journal of Law in Context, vol. 1, no. 3, p.269
[35] Doan, "'Subversive Stories and Hegemonic Tales' of Child Sexual Abuse, p.269
[36] Ken Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change, and Social Worlds*, (London; New York: Routledge, 1994), p.120

certainly not deserving of any place in a traditional academic discourse.[37] Christine Clegg writes, "One of the achievements of feminist politics, in a range of disciplines and practices, has been to secure a hearing for traumatic narratives of incest."[38] Choosing a feminist approach – choosing to be located in a community that is appreciative of the value of a personal voice, of women's voices, and of the voices of abused women in particular – secures as far as possible a safe place for these voices to be heard.

A community of feminist discourse is a "safe place" for research on child sexual abuse in the sense that it allows a place for these experiences to be spoken, and not just believed and listened to, as if the achievement of feminism is personal affirmation, or therapy in the guise of academia. It provides a space in which these experiences are recognised as legitimate challenges to a dominant discourse that would usually not even hear them to exclude them. It also provides allies – others who are proposing similar or complimentary arguments and challenges, so that the challenge may be collective and therefore stronger. Rosi Braidotti argues that any voice that speaks against the dominant discourse requires a community to function as a "legitimising agent".[39] She chooses then to adopt a "communal subject"; to speak in terms of "we women", not with the intention of ignoring or ironing out differences, but as a way of positioning herself in a community of women who, from their many different situations and perspectives, all speak against a tradition that (in differing ways) oppresses these voices. A communal voice is louder and more powerful than a lone voice, which risks being drowned out, "Women, speaking in hard-earned solidarity with one another on their various positions, disturb the patriarchal narratives."[40]

Summary

To bring these four aspects together, a feminist approach involves a woman's making a conscious choice to adopt a method and a location in which the legitimacy of

[37] Bons-Storm writes, "When women open their mouths and tell their stories, their stories often are not heard as true stories about disturbing situations. On the contrary: the women are labeled as psychologically 'disturbed'. Women's stories about their confusion, anger, and depression are frequently seen as manifestations of the unbalanced and irrational way they deal with reality" (Bons-Storm, *The Incredible Woman*, p.72).
[38] Clegg, "Feminist Recoveries in 'My Father's House'", p.67
[39] Braidotti, *Beelden van Leegte*, p.95, cited in Bons-Storm, *The Incredible Woman*, p.84
[40] Bons-Storm, *The Incredible Woman*, p.84

her own voice and experiences is recognised. It involves an awareness and a negotiation of the distance between her and the dominant discourse, with recognition of the social situation of both. A feminist approach gives her the opportunity to place herself within a community of voices who acknowledge her subjectivity and the legitimacy of her voice and experiences, and provides an opportunity for her to question and challenge the traditional meanings that have been attributed to her experiences, and the roots of the attribution of those meanings.

Identifying feminist theology as the intellectual location for this study connects to the study's central question of belonging, with its associated questions about meaning and voice. It is a safe place for different meanings to be expressed experimentally by voices that are welcome in this location. Taking a feminist approach to considering these questions means that those voices that have already been silenced and overpowered during acts of abuse are now recognised as being of worth as the foundations of considering what the experience of abuse may come to mean. Drawing the voices of women who have been sexually abused into a supportive and affirming community provides a safe space for those voices to be heard and amplified, so that collectively they form a strong challenge to a much louder voice that tends to assume the right to interpret their experiences. A feminist approach to the study of the attributing of meaning to the experience of child sexual abuse challenges the nature of the meanings commonly presented, and the rights of those who attribute meaning, and allows for new meanings to be suggested and explored.

Hearing Wounded Voices

Chapter three will introduce three pieces of literature produced by women who were sexually abused as children, with chapter four providing the space for theological reflection on the themes and ideas raised by this literature. The three accounts that will be outlined and reflected on are Martha Ramsey's *Where I Stopped: Remembering an Adolescent Rape*, Rebecca Parker's writings in *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for what Saves Us*, and Sylvia Fraser's *My Father's House: A Memoir of Incest and Healing*. It is these accounts that will form the basis for the development of richer meanings, and meanings that are different to those often attributed, to the experience of childhood sexual abuse. Identifying the theological significance of

the themes they contain and the challenges they present shows that voices of sexually abused women truly belong in theological conversation, and in those communities that use a theological vocabulary.

The decision to have the as the foundation of the thesis, words of women who have been abused, was an obvious one. Given that the thesis is concerned with the belonging in Christian communities of voices of women who have been abused, this had to begin with and retain the status of these voices in order to treat the questions appropriately. The purpose of this section of the chapter then is to go into more detail in explaining the considerations involved in deciding to prioritise personal accounts of childhood sexual abuse, and then going on to describe in more detail how I will be reading them and drawing out and developing themes from them.

Pragmatic considerations - "What better experts do we have?"[41]

Writing critically about and within an academic context that has come to favour the perspective of the detached and objective commentator, feminist philosopher Susan Brison argues that feminists have been among those who have started to argue and show that the "traditional philosophical obsession with the impersonal and acontextual" [42] cannot be defended. Far from being "sloppy" or "self-indulgent", she argues that the personal voice is necessary if we are to gain access to the experiences of others, and develop a method of understanding based on empathy and mutual conversation, rather than on detached reasoning that by definition avoids engaging with those silenced by physical and sexual violence.

Brison's critique comes in the context of her book *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self,* which she writes out of her own experience of rape and attempted murder. Looking at how such topics have tended to be treated in her own academic discipline, Brison says,

> We are trained to write in an abstract, universal voice and to shun first person narratives as biased and inappropriate for academic discourse. Some topics, however, such as the impact of racial and sexual violence on victims, cannot even

[41] Jane Chervous, *From Silence to Sanctuary: A Guide to Understanding, Responding to and Preventing Abuse* (London: SPCK, 2004), p.51
[42] Brison, *Aftermath*, p.25

> be broached unless those affected by such crimes can tell of their experiences in their own words.[43]

To illustrate her point, Brison gives an example of one philosophical publication on rape, in which the author, Ross Harrison, writes, "What principally distinguishes rape from normal sexual activity is the consent of the raped woman."[44] Brison compares this to our understanding of other crimes, arguing that there is simply no parallel. We do not think of theft as "coerced gift-giving" or of murder as "assisted suicide minus consent." Rather, our understandings of these crimes incorporates an awareness of the violation involved in both cases, which makes it inconceivable that anyone would ever consent to theft or murder. Brison argues that the reason it is so easy for an otherwise well-educated person to understand rape in these terms – as "normal sexual activity minus consent" is a lack of awareness of the violation that rape involves – "the nature of the violation in the case of rape hasn't been all that obvious."[45]

The point is that the reason that the nature of the violation has not been obvious is because the experience of rape has tended to be thought of as a private concern, not something to be spoken of publicly, and not something of political concern.[46] Wherever rape has been discussed, the voices that have been heard have been those "objective" and "detached" voices. Rita Nakashima Brock, writing of the decision to write honestly of how her theology has arisen out of life struggles and experiences, describes the debate and concerns that she had when coming to this decision, "How could we do this without the shield of academic language, the screen of objectivity?"[47] She recognises though, that this objective approach to academic writing is a *screen*; something that conceals rather than engages with truth. Her co-author, Rebecca Parker, writes, "The mask of objectivity, with its academic, distanced tone, hid the *lived* character of our theological questions and our theological affirmations."[48]

---

[43] Brison, *Aftermath*, p.6
[44] Ross Harrison, "Rape Case Study in Political Philosophy" in Sylvana Tomaselli and Roy Porter (eds.), *Rape: An Historical and Cultural Enquiry*, (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p.52, cited in Brison, *Aftermath*, p.6
[45] Brison, *Aftermath*, p.7
[46] Brison, *Aftermath*, p.97
[47] Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us* (Boston MA: Beacon, 2002), p.7
[48] Brock and Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes*, p.6. Italics in original.

Martha Ramsey's account provides an interesting example of this point, when she expresses her feelings about a telling of her story in a language that did not offer the possibility of accessing the nature and gravity of her experience. Writing of the defence lawyer's retelling of her story at her rapist's trial, she says,

> I was offended…aesthetically, by what he was doing to my story. He was making it boring. All the intensity and color of what had happened to me – the terrible, numb fear, the physical hurting, the appearance and disappearance of the rapist like a thunderbolt or ravaging beast of prey – all that was reduced to a plodding account of times, locations, and actions told in worlds like 'come' and 'go', mostly restricted to the answers 'Yes' or 'No.'[49]

The issue could be thought of as a question of truth – not so much the truth regarding events, but more the truth regarding the experience and significance of those events; what kind of telling of the experience allows for a better understanding of what those experiences were or are like and what they could mean? Ramsey makes no complaint about the factual accuracy of the lawyer's retelling of her rape; her objection is that the way it was told meant that the story the lawyer related did not seem to correspond with the essence to her of what had happened. Brison makes a similar point when describing how, in the course of her attacker's trial, she came to realise that the "official story" that was being told in court was told with the purpose not of conveying what had happened, but with the purpose of achieving a conviction. Consequently, aspects of the story that were of perhaps the most importance to her, such as her fear and panic at the time, were left out of the official version, as they did not further this purpose, "The point was not exactly to get at the truth, unless 'truth' is defined purely instrumentally as that which will help accomplish a goal, in this case, the goal of getting the suspect convicted."[50]

It is one thing for this 'monotonising' and 'de-phenomenonising' of experience to occur in the courtroom, where the goal is focussed on the legal outcome and not on the expression of a woman's experience.[51] If the goal is a greater depth of meaning with regards childhood sexual abuse, then a different approach is needed, and it requires a

[49] Ramsey, *Where I Stopped*, p.84
[50] Brison, *Aftermath*, p.107
[51] That said, the view that courtroom discourse *must* take this style is not beyond question. Carrie Doan argues that the way evidence is presented in court with the assumptions about what is accepted truth, feeds into an environment that doubts the rights and abilities of women to report their own experiences in their own terms, and functions as ammunition to claims about the unreliability of the stories of people who have been sexually abused. She writes, "this privileging of logico-scientific knowledge claims over narrative claims of abuse in legal institutions reflects and reinscribes gendered constructions of epistemological authority, contributes to an erasure of feminist understandings of gender, power and violence, and has contributed to a backlash against survivors' claims" (Doan, "'Subversive Stories and Hegemonic Tales' of Child Sexual Abuse", p.298)

different sort of language. Ken Plummer claims that the stories that help us to imagine and understand are those texts that are "poetic and creative", and that "pull us into them so that we may savour the new understandings and sensibilities of them."[52] He compares such stories with the storytelling that he contends occurs most often in social science, which in his view fails to engage the reader in this way,

> Much story telling (especially in social science) does not do this at all – it is almost ugly in its stark, clichéd, monotone manner. Much sociology, for instance, tells the dullest stories in the most dreary ways – often deliberately so, for this is the mantle of scientific story telling: it is supposed to be dull.[53]

As well as being a likely cause of offence for someone like Ramsey, such a telling of abuse stories, because of its style, simply would fail to capture what the experience could mean in any place in which dullness is not the aim of the conversation. Plummer argues for the importance of an "aesthetic connection" that a story makes with its reader, highlighting the importance of finding ways of telling stories that "enrich our imaginations, help us to see wider and further, that stir the spirit or that may capture sense nuggets of wisdom."[54]

To illustrate the point further, the following are accounts of the act of self harm (frequently associated with having been sexually abused in childhood). The first account is taken from a publication produced by a working group drawn from British and Irish churches, with the remit of examining how churches understand and respond to sexual abuse. The book's section on self harm reads,

> Some adults who have been sexually abused as children are so angry they self-harm. Self-harm is any behaviour such as cutting, burning, overdosing, hitting or damaging body parts with implements. Some observers consider eating disorders also a form of self-harm. Usually self-harm is not about suicide but is a way of feeling better when overwhelmed by very strong emotions. These emotions might include anger, rage, shame, guilt or self-hatred. Feeling physical pain becomes preferable to feeling mental pain, anger, shame or guilt for what many survivors believe is 'their fault'.
>
> The pain of self-harm sets off endorphins in the brain, which cause natural 'highs', somewhat like morphine, that can act as a form of anaesthesia. After self-harm, survivors often feel calmer and better.[55]

[52] Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories*, p.171
[53] Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories*, p.171
[54] Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories*, p.171
[55] Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, *Time for Action: Sexual abuse, the Churches and a New Dawn for Survivors* (London: Church House Publishing, 2002), p.44

The second account of self harm is written by Sue William Silverman, a woman sexually abused by her father over a period of several years in her childhood and adolescence. Describing one act of self harm and its significance to her, she writes,

> I fill a bathtub with water and sit in it, pounding my fists and crying. With a Gillette single-edged razor, I cut the only place on my body that doesn't exist, that I can neither name nor know. I don't think I have a choice. I must bleed. I am mesmerized by blood, as addicted to blood as is my father. I cut myself because I believe I'm evil. I have always believed I must punish myself by bleeding. I believe my blood is this evil and he, he is the one who owns the blood. I must drain it from my body. I never feel pain as I cut my body. My body is nothing. I don't even live inside it. Why must I lug it around, this burden of a body, always too heavy, even when it's skinny? I know this body deserves to die. Soon it will be leached a pure transparent white. It is only then I'll be able to love it.
>
> Finally, I am calm – calmer. Thin swirls of blood waft through the water. It is my belief that blood calms, that after I cut myself, after I drain evil from my body, I am better. Simply, I exhaust myself and am depleted.[56]

The point is not that the first account is less accurate than the second (although, as it happens, its assumptions about the role of physical pain in an act of self harm can be questioned, since many women who harm their bodies report feeling no physical pain). The point is that the detached and impersonal manner in which it is written results in a description of the act of self harm that extracts the emotional content and meaning out of something to which emotion is enormously significant.

Personal accounts of abuse offer insights into this experience that simply would not otherwise be possible. Not listening to these voices is the easier option, as it avoids having to be confronted with the depth of pain encountered in these experiences, and acknowledging the possibility that such things can happen to anyone at any time. But not listening to these voices, far from producing an objective perspective, produces one that is shielded from truths spoken out of circumstances of abuse, resulting in a perspective that is biased towards those who have not been abused. Why should their truths be assumed to be more truthful?

[56] Sue William Silverman, *Because I Remember Terror, Father, I Remember You* (Athens, GA.; London: University of Georgia Press, 1999), p.196

Ethical considerations: the dynamics of abuse and the dynamics of research

One feature of experiences of childhood sexual abuse that will be discussed further after looking at the accounts presented in chapter three, is that of being driven into a state of silence by/after the abuse. Maya Angelou's autobiographical novel, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, presents a vivid description of her experience of being silenced by sexual abuse (a rape at the age of eight by her mother's boyfriend), to the extent that, for some time afterwards, she did not speak at all,

> I could feel the evilness flowing through my body and waiting, pent up, to rush off my tongue if I tried to open my mouth. I clamped my teeth shut, I'd hold it in. If it escaped, wouldn't it flood the world and all the innocent people?
> …Just my breath, carrying my words out, might poison people and they'd curl up and die like the black fat slugs that only pretended.[57]

With a similar force, Martha Ramsey's account of her experience of childhood rape considers in depth the issue of silence as a significant part of her experience during the rape, and of her experience afterwards, living in a world that she felt continued to impose this silence. She describes the silence during the rape as "an abyss, a void…a loud, dreadful stillness in my ears, the removal of all usual connection between the senses and the mind."[58] She says that the inability or refusal of other people to recognise her experiences fed into the silence already imposed on her by the events of the rape, and also identifies this silence as the most harmful part of her experiences. She suggests that she experienced the silence of the people around her in the months and years that followed as an extension of the silence that had been the central, and most harmful, part of the rape, "Did this silence ever 'wear off'? I say no, I say it simply faded into and was transformed into other silences."[59]

An approach to research on child sexual abuse that exacerbates or repeats this silencing of victims would be morally indefensible. It is appalling when sexual violence occurs alongside or is followed by what could be described as professional or intellectual violence. Carrie Doan, writing about the authority granted in a legal setting to the testimonies of people who have been sexually abused in childhood, in comparison to the

[57] Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, in *The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* (New York: Random House, 2004), pp.69; 70
[58] Ramsey, *Where I Stopped*, pp.107-108
[59] Ramsey, *Where I Stopped*, p.108

authority granted to the testimonies of expert witnesses (primiarily psychologists), argues that the legal system is biased towards "assign[ing] epistemological authority to experts rather than survivors themselves."[60]

Recognising the epistemological authority of women who have been sexually abused is not just a positive choice of one methodological approach; it is at the same time a conscious and definitive rejection of any approach that subverts the knowledge and experiences of abused women into a position of submission in relation to more powerful discourses.[61] In speaking about the "epistemological authority" of these women, it should be clarified that this phrase does not necessarily entail a claim that women who have been sexually abused are to be thought of as the only ones with the authority to talk about this experience. It can, and should, be read more as the claim that they possess this authority along with others who speak about this subject, while bearing in mind that these women's voices carry a particular kind of authority, and are constantly in danger of being silenced.

While a woman who has been sexually abused may experience this silencing in a violent sense – as an order to remain quiet or an outright rejection of the validity of her perspective – her silence may also be understood in connection to the isolation created by the experience and aftermath of sexual abuse. In what has become a classic text on sexual abuse, Ellen Bass and Louise Thornton's book *I Never Told Anyone*, Louise Thornton lists possible reasons why a child often does not tell anyone about being sexually abused.[62] The child may have very practical reasons for not telling, based on her fear of what the consequences will be and of how people will react. She may have a fear of not being believed, or of being blamed for the abuse. She may be afraid of the effect the facts will have on the person she chooses to tell. She perhaps does not tell because of her own embarrassment, shame and guilt about the abuse, not wanting other people to see her the way she sees herself, believing that "[t]o tell anyone is to be disgraced in her own eyes and the eyes of others."[63]

---

[60] Doan, "'Subversive Stories and Hegemonic Tales' of Child Sexual Abuse", p.296

[61] This is a point that will be unpacked in more detail in chapter two, when critiquing approaches evident in clinical perspectives on child sexual abuse.

[62] Ellen Bass and Louise Thornton, *I Never Told Anyone* (New York; London: Harper & Row, 1983), pp.14-19

[63] Florence Rush, writing in the foreword to Bass and Thornton, *I Never Told Anyone*, p.13

So it seems that the culture of silence that surrounds child sexual abuse can also be understood, in addition to a violent silencing, as also a lack of a place in which to speak. Brison, in discussing the limitations of language when trying to tell about a sexual assault, cites Primo Levi's statement, "our language lacks words to express this offense, the demolition of a man."[64] Brison questions whether this is really the case; whether the problem is that there are no words that can be used to communicate a trauma narrative adequately, or whether the real problem is that there is no one willing to listen to such a narrative. She argues that the widespread refusal to listen to accounts of abuse makes it difficult for survivors to tell their stories, even to themselves.[65]

Prioritising the perspectives offered in personal accounts of abuse, and cultivating a space for them to be heard and taken seriously, subverts both the violent silencing of abused women, and this pervasive culture of silence. It challenges the dynamics that underlie abusive practices as they are worked out in acts of sexual abuse and as they may be worked out in subsequent research on sexual abuse. Ramsey writes of how she reached a point of realising that the most appropriate place for her to speak about her experiences was among people who had also been abused, "I decided then that I must give myself the opportunity to talk about my rape with those who would understand in a way no one else could – people who had been raped themselves."[66] Interpreting the three personal accounts presented in chapter three within a feminist framework that recognises their validity from the outset is a challenge to the silencing dynamics of abuse.

Thinking with Personal Accounts of Abuse

The choice of written accounts

The decision to look at written accounts of childhood sexual abuse, and the choice to look at these three accounts in particular, was largely determined by the fact that the research questions required accounts of abuse presented in a way that gave rise to richer and alternative meanings to the experience of abuse than those most commonly

[64] Brison, *Aftermath*, p.50
[65] Brison, *Aftermath*, p.50
[66] Ramsey, *Where I Stopped*, p.236

accepted.[67] These particular accounts offer a depth of insight that is the result of the fact that they have been produced over a period of years, and also of the fact that their authors' situations (i.e. backgrounds in literature, theology and philosophy, and careers as a poet, theologian and journalist/novelist) are such that they employ creative metaphors and imagery that invite a more imaginative consideration than might usually be possible.

Elizabeth Harrison, in discussing the value of imaginative literature in allowing access to a greater depth of understanding of the experience of child sexual abuse, suggests that written literature achieves this partly because it creates the opportunity for the use of images and metaphors that open up richer or more complex meanings than would be possible in just a straight description of events. She also identifies the advantage of this being a written resource; one that the reader can choose to stop reading, to re-read, to pause at particular points, and to move back and forth, connecting different parts of the novel or paying particular attention to specific parts - a "sustained type of examination [that] would not be possible or even ethically prudent with human subjects."[68]

Harrison also argues then that an analysis of imaginative literature, whether autobiographical or fictional, "allows the reader to examine aspects of human behavior that cannot be easily captured by disclosure or conventional means of research."[69] Written accounts of the experience of abuse provide a source that is the result of repeated reflection over time, and which is therefore likely to be of a nature and a depth that would be very unlikely to be found through other methods of research such as interview-based methods.

In her examination of Sylvia Fraser's *My Father's House* (one of the texts to be looked at in chapter three), Christine Clegg discusses the literary nature of Fraser's book. She identifies Fraser's book as indicative of a particular genre of writing which she

[67] Chapter two will critique the most dominant discourse on understanding the meaning of childhood sexual abuse.
[68] Elizabeth Harrison, "Disclosing the Details of Child Sexual Abuse: Can Imaginative Literature Help Ease the Suffering?", *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing*, vol. 18, no. 3, p.128
[69] Harrison, "Disclosing the Details of Child Sexual Abuse", p.133

describes as "caught between the acts of witnessing and creative writing."[70] This genre, she claims, "emerges at the frontiers of speech and literature, memory and consciousness, autobiography and fiction", and although these texts have a claim to truth, they also set out with the intention of working with and developing literary forms. She points out that the author is a professional novelist, and that Fraser herself says in the preface that the book is not a literal telling of events as they were,

> To provide focus and structure, I have used many of the techniques of the novelist. I have also adopted fictional names and otherwise disguised persons who appear in the narrative. No attempt has been made to create full or balanced characterizations, only to portray such persons and myself as our lives relate to this difficult story.[71]

The devices she has chosen to employ in writing the book have been chosen in order to portray not strictly factual events or characters, but to portray the experience of incest. This aim is not necessarily well served by a factual narrative of events, but is better served by the imaginative and poetic styles and devices she chooses.

The choice to look at these three published written accounts of the experience of abuse was made with the knowledge that these particular accounts contain the resources to make this type of connection, which give rise to wider and further understandings by means of poesis, creativity and imagination.

Narrowing the question from that of 'why written accounts?', to the question of 'why these particular three written accounts?', there were three discernible factors leading to these three particular books' forming the basis of chapters thee and four. First is that each of these authors writes her own story in a way that situates the personal within the social and the political contexts in which the abuse took place and in which the author is later situated as she writes, which (as discussed above) is one of the features of the feminist approach I have taken to the study overall. Carrie Doan highlights the potential for personal accounts of child sexual abuse to be presented in such a way that, because they focus on just one individual, they "fail to identify the social systems of inequality associated with abuse [which] may produce hyper-individualistic and depoliticising accounts of these problems."[72] With this potential danger in mind, she then gives two examples of written narratives (Dorothy Allison's fictional and Maya Angelou's autobiographical writings) that she argues avoid this danger. Allison's writing

[70] Clegg, "Feminist Recoveries in 'My Father's House'",, p.70
[71] Sylvia Fraser, *My Father's House: A Memoir of Incest and Healing* (London: Viagro Press, 2004), p.1
[72] Doan, "'Subversive Stories and Hegemonic Tales' of Child Sexual Abuse", p.295

for example, she claims, "depicts the problem of childhood sexual abuse within a context of age, gender, class and heterosexist domination."[73]

All three of the authors whose books form the basis for chapter three began writing with conscious recognition of the impact of the women's movement on the changing social environment in which they grew up and now live, and they wrote with the awareness that the context in which they were writing was one in which women were slowly but increasingly speaking out against sexual violence and child abuse.[74] That said, all three, in different ways, suggest an element of protest against their prior silencing, and so their accounts are produced as a social and political (and in Parker's case, theological) challenge to a context that they contend has previously refused to hear them.

Commitment to the importance of engagement with social and political contexts has also determined that in selecting written accounts (and indeed in determining the focus of the study), I have chosen to focus on women's accounts of their experiences of childhood sexual abuse. In doing so, it is not my intention to imply that that sexual abuse of boys is somehow less important, but a case can be made that socially and politically, the sexual abuse of girls/women and boys/men carry different meanings and significance. The abuse of girls, and the experience of women who have been abused, is situated in particular ways within a context in which little girls are sexualised, and women are deemed hysterical and unreliable, in ways that boys and men are not. The abuse of boys, and the experience of men who have been abused, sits either in a different context, or in the same context in a different way. To try to talk about the sexual abuse of boys and the meaning that men might construct out of that experience, in a way that did these things justice, would require a separate or a larger study.

A second, (and it should be said, unanticipated and unwelcome) consideration relates to the importance of telling stories of childhood sexual abuse carefully and cautiously. While reading more widely, looking to select particular personal accounts of experiences of childhood sexual abuse, I came across a number that were written in a way that seemed designed to shock the reader in ways that were neither wise nor

[73] Doan, "'Subversive Stories and Hegemonic Tales' of Child Sexual Abuse", p.302
[74] Ramsey, *Where I Stopped*, p. , Brock and Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes*, pp.4-5, 144-152,

appropriate – accounts written in a way that certainly carried with them too high a risk of exploitation, and which at times verged on being pornographic.[75]

Ron O'Grady, president of ECPAT (End Child Prostitution in Asian Tourism) refers in the introduction to his book *The Hidden Shame of the Church: Sexual Abuse of Children and the Church*, to the first of the four books he has written on child sexual abuse. In this first book, *The Child and the Tourist*, he researched and gave a full account of the sexual abuse and murder in the Philippines of a young girl, Rosario Baluyot, by an Austrian doctor. He says he wrote this account wanting to shock other people into realising the truth of what had happened and was continuing to happen, but learned later from a police officer that the pages of his book that told Rosario's story had been photocopied and passed around a group of child sex offenders in a prison. He writes, "Far from being shocked by the account, the abusers found it exciting, stimulating and erotic."[76]

A third, and in some ways the most significant issue regarding the choice of these three particular accounts, is the fact that each of these three books has been significant for me on a personal level. Issues raised by this fact will be addressed in the following section of this chapter, but suffice to say here that each of these books has interacted with my own experiences and my understandings of those experiences and their meanings, so that these books have significance for me on more than a purely intellectual level.

Reading and interpreting personal accounts

Edward Said opens his paper "Opponents, Audiences, Constituences, and Community" with the three questions, "Who writes? For whom is the writing being done? In what circumstances? These, it seems to me, are the questions whose answers provide us with the ingredients making for a politics of interpretation."[77] Considering

[75] Accounts written in this way included Sue William Silverman's book *Because I Remember Terror, Father, I Remember You* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1999), and Carol Rambo Ronai's paper "Multiple Reflections on Child Sexual Abuse: An Argument for a Layered Account", *Journal of Contemporary Account*, 23 (1993), pp.395-426. I have referred to parts of both these accounts at a number of points in the thesis, where they related to other points being made, but avoided reproducing those parts of them that I felt sure were not appropriate in the way they were written.
[76] Ron O'Grady, *The Hidden Shame of the Church: Sexual Abuse of Children and the Church* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2001), p.viii
[77] Said, "Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies, and Community", p.7

these questions in relation to the accounts presented and considered in chapters three and four will be helpful in reflecting on these accounts, their reading, and their interpretation. This is a necessary part of the study's being firmly rooted in the social, cultural and political contexts that may influence the content or style of the material being engaged with, and that may influence the way in which that material is interpreted.

All the accounts presented in chapter three are written in a North American context (two in the USA, one in Canada). All the authors are university educated, one to masters level and one to doctoral level. Writing and teaching is the occupation of all three: Ramsey is primarily a poet, Parker a theologian, and Fraser a novelist. The accounts chosen are not intended to be representative of the experience of childhood sexual abuse; there is no implication that their contents could or should be generalised. The accounts are exemplary only of how these three individuals have interpreted their own experiences and how they have placed their experiences in conversation with their own literary, social, political and theological contexts.

With regards the questions, "For whom is the writing being done? In what circumstances?", it should perhaps be pointed out that these are published personal accounts that have been produced to make a profit in a social and cultural setting in which personal accounts of abuse have become increasingly common and popular. Confessional literature has become a commodity that is produced, bought, and sold to a ready market. There is the potential for this point to constitute a criticism against the use of personal accounts of child sexual abuse as the basis for exploring the possible meanings that this experience may have. Produced in the context of merchandise for a keen market, confessional accounts can be charged with sensationalising the facts of abuse, or even stretching the facts in order to meet the desires of the consumers of this literature.

The issue of questioning the truth of written and published accounts of child sexual abuse is one worth considering (although I do so with the awareness of a long historical denial of the facts of child sexual abuse, of which this may well be a recent incarnation). One point to be made is that even if these accounts do not at all times report events precisely as they happened (whether because they are not remembered with one hundred percent accuracy, or whether they were modified to cater for an audience),

nevertheless they still reveal truths about the experiences about which the authors are writing.

In addressing this question, Ken Plummer refers to the text *Interpreting Women's Lives*, which focuses on autobiographies, biographies and life histories which, the authors claim, "illuminate the course of a life over time and allow for its interpretation in its historical and cultural context."[78] Plummer discusses the point made in this text,

> When talking about their lives, people lie sometimes, forget a lot, exaggerate, become confused, and get things wrong. Yet they are revealing truths. These truths don't reveal the past as it 'actually was', aspiring to a standard of objectivity. They give us instead *the truth of our experiences*.[79]

Plummer goes on to argue that because people's personal narratives are not presented as objective or scientific truth, they cannot be examined or assessed according to the same criteria. It would be nonsensical to attempt to prove their truth, and doing so would not aid our understanding of them, "We come to understand them only through interpretation, paying careful attention to the contexts that shape their creation and to the world views that inform them."[80]

Differentiating between the term "narrative" as a linguistic construct (the arrangement of the words of a text into the sentences, paragraphs and overall structure of the text) and "story" as a cognitive construct (how the narrative has meaning), Wendy Patterson argues that the story told in a text has no existence that is separate or prior to that produced in the telling and the reading. Unlike narrative, story is not fixed, but is always an interpretation made by the reader, influenced by the circumstances of each reader, "The story that is read from the narrative, the knowing that is taken from the telling, depends on who you are, where you are, in time and space, and what assumptions you bring to your reading of that narrative."[81] The 'truth' of a narrative is not then a function of the text alone, but is better understood as an interpretation that is drawn out of the text, and is influenced by the writer, the reader, and the situations surrounding both.

---

[78] Personal Narratives Group, *Interpreting Women's Lives*, (Bloomington: Indiana Press, 1989), p.4, cited in Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories*, p.167.
[79] Personal Narratives Group, *Interpreting Women's Lives*, p.261, cited in Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories*, p. 167. Italics added.
[80] Personal Narratives Group, *Interpreting Women's Lives*, cited in Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories*, p.167
[81] Wendy Patterson, *Reading Trauma: Exploring the Relationship between Narrative and Coping*, PhD thesis, Nottingham Trent University, 2000, pp.19-20

It is important to acknowledge that the presentation of these three accounts in chapter three is a negotiation between the words of the authors, and my own circumstances that have influenced my choice of passages to include or omit, as well as influencing the way I have read them. Plummer talks about how social patterns and pre-established experiences, perspectives and interests will influence and shape our reading of a story. Specifically with relation to the situation of sexual violence, he writes,

> Women who have experienced violence in their lives may read violent sexual stories in a more subtle, complex, demanding and concerned way – with a much greater degree of sophistication in interpretation than those who have not experienced such violence.[82]

Reading the accounts in chapter three from this position may well have led to certain aspects of the stories being emphasised and developed because of the ease with which they were drawn into the conversation that formed the basis of my interpretation. The fact that I have had experiences that resonate with those in these accounts may have made my reading of them more subtle, complex and in some ways sophisticated. At the same time, it may (and I think probably does) mean that I have tended to focus in on those parts of the accounts that most resonate with my own experiences, with the result that the contents of chapter three are more a combination of my experiences with theirs than they are an objective overview of their stories as they tell them. The summaries of these accounts are necessarily selective, and there are events and themes that are neglected or overlooked, either deliberately or unintentionally.

Any written work on experiences of childhood sexual abuse will be limited by the biases of the writer and of the sources she/he engages with. It will also be limited simply by the fact that this is an attempt to express in words alone an experience that is in essence far more and far beyond something that can be expressed in words. Nevertheless, limited though it is, piecing together fragments of language with which to communicate features of the experience of child sexual abuse gives this experience a place in a social location that is overwhelmingly verbal. It does not tell the whole story, as the whole story cannot be told with words alone.

Given this fact, and my background and experiences, it is inevitable that my own readings of these three accounts has involved as much (if not more) emotional as strictly

[82] Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories*, pp.43-44

intellectual engagement with the texts over a period of several years, and over these years the conversation with these texts has been significant on a personal level as well as in shaping ideas with the potential for theological reflection and development. This is a further reason for choosing to locate the study within a framework in which the value of emotional engagement is recognised. Feminist philosopher Sandra Bartky argues in her paper "Sympathy and Solidarity" (which appears in her book bearing the same title), that a transformative recognition of the Other requires something apart from "more and better cognition."[83] Reacting against what she terms an "excessive intellectualism of much contemporary feminist theory"[84], she turns to the phenomenology of Max Scheler, identifying in his thinking the moral worth of "genuine fellow-feeling" that she argues has the potential to bring about knowledge that is transformative.

Bartky writes with particular reference to both a feminist frustration with a male lack of appreciation of women's situations and struggles, as well as the charge of racial, class, hetrosexist and ethnocentric bias in the works of white feminists. So when, as in the example she gives, women demand greater understanding from men regarding the social conditions and biases with which they live, their demand is a demand not only for more knowledge to be acquired in a cognitive sense, but a demand for a knowledge that leads to "new sympathies, new affects as well as new cognitions and new forms of intersubjectivity."[85]

Bartky emphasises the capacity we have "to enter imaginatively into the lives of others – their joys and sorrows, the particular texture of their suffering."[86] Similarly, Susan Brison discusses how feminists are increasingly seeing the value of personal accounts as a way of gaining "imaginative access" to the experiences of others, giving rise to a method of moral understanding that has empathy at its root.[87] Reading the three accounts in a way that is emotionally engaged with their content has allowed me to acquire particular kinds of knowledge – knowledge that requires sympathy as much as it requires cognition.

---

[83] Sandra Bartky, "Sympathy and Solidarity" in Sandra Bartky, *Sympathy and Solidarity and Other Essays* (Lanham, MD; Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), p.70
[84] Bartky, "Sympathy and Solidarity", p.73
[85] Bartky, "Sympathy and Solidarity", pp.71-72
[86] Bartky, "Sympathy and Solidarity", p.71
[87] Brison, *Aftermath*, p.25

This approach of cognitive and emotional interaction with these accounts is an interesting answer to a potentially worrying question about the decision to "use" the voices of abused women to achieve an aim they themselves never intended. Lucy Tatman, addressing questions around self mutilation as an act of atonement, raises the moral question of by her choosing to "use" women's abused and mutilated bodies for the purpose of theological reflection. Her concern is that doing so could be "appropriating their bodies, using their experiences for my own intellectual ends."[88] She believes that she is able to avoid this charge, and defend her choice of research topic by appealing to the emotional engagement she has with the subject, and with the subjects. She writes, "let me be clear from the outset: it is because I know and love too many women who self-mutilate that I set out to question the concept of self-mutilation *as I had absorbed it*."[89] Her paper then proceeds in a way that does not present "the concept of self-mutilation" as a cold intellectual question, but as a behaviour with which she is emotionally involved due to her relationships with a number of women who have self harmed. The questions she asks and the suggestions she makes are presented from a location of emotional engagement that does not avoid confusion and pain on her part with regard to the issues she discusses.

Placing Bartky, Brison, and Tatman's points in the context of this study, their arguments bring legitimacy to an approach that has been at all times emotional alongside (in fact, usually prior to) intellectual. If we are to "get it" with regards experiences of childhood sexual abuse, which though varied in nature are always charged emotionally, any attempt to understand aspects of these experiences in a way that put emotional engagement to one side is to miss vital elements of these experiences. The accounts presented in chapter three tell stories of despair, self-harm, and attempted suicide. They could be read in a manner that purported to be emotionally detached, but to read them in this way would do a disservice to their subject matter, and to their authors, and would impede a rich and meaningful understanding of the experiences they describe.

So on a number of levels, in looking in detail at the three personal accounts of abuse it is not my intention to present 'the truth' of what it means to have been sexually

[88] Lucy Tatman, "The Yearning to be Whole-enough or to Feel Something, Not Nothing: A Feminist Theological Consideration of Self-mutilation as an Act of Atonement", *Feminist Theology* 17, (Jan. 1998), pp.29

[89] Lucy Tatman, "The Yearning to be Whole-enough or to Feel Something, Not Nothing", pp.29. Italics in original.

abused, or to unpack what these texts 'really mean'. Rather, the reflection that follows is perhaps better seen as the result of a series of long conversations with the text, in which imagination and emotion has at times played a far more significant role than any theoretical model of interpretation. The meanings that have emerged as an outcome of this process have been influenced and shaped by these emotional interactions and by my own circumstances and experiences. They are "true", in that they are authentic and honest presentations of the thoughts that unfolded after reading these texts in relation to my own questions and experiences, and in relation to theological literature and ideas. They are at no point intended to be objective, nor to they pretend to get to the root of what the author was intending to communicate. Ownership of these meanings is shared between the storyteller and the reader, with interpretation as a negotiation between the two,

> Stories get told and read in different ways in different contexts. The consuming of a tale centres upon the different *social worlds* and *interpretive communities* who can hear the story in different ways and hence not others and who may come to produce their own 'shared memories.'[90]

[90] Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories*, p.22

Chapter Two
Hijacking Meaning: Psychiatric Interpretations of Child Sexual Abuse

> Our work is centred on the stories that patients tell us…But we stand on fragile ground, and in trying to help others we always run the risk of making things worse and causing harm. The danger is that we misappropriate the stories people tell us, that we deface them by ripping from them that which suits our purpose. How easy it is to obliterate the other when we do this, even though we consider that our intentions are for the best. We speak for you. We silence you.
>
> Patrick Bracken and Philip Thomas[1]

In the previous chapter I set out the location of the study, with the primary stipulation that the study is to be located in a place in which it is safe to explore the central and associated questions. This would be a place in which the voices of women who have been abused could form a central and significant part of a conversation that seeks to carve out a place of belonging in Christian communities for past experiences of sexual abuse. It would also be a place in which the respect that these voices are accorded would allow for them to critique those discourses that are more dominant in conversations about childhood sexual abuse, leading to constructive conversation that allows for the suggestion and development of new understandings of these experiences. In chapters three and four I will be focussing in depth on the insights of three women with histories of childhood sexual abuse, placing these insights in theological conversation in such a way that new understandings are reached. In chapters five and six I will then take such insights into critiquing commonly held convictions and practices in Christian communities.

Before moving on to these tasks though, which are firmly located in this "safe place", in this chapter I will be exploring a highly unsafe place that it is necessary to venture into because of its status as a place in which experiences of childhood sexual abuse are commonly interpreted, and whose interpretations are enormously influential in shaping how the experience and aftermath of child sexual abuse is understood.

[1] Patrick Bracken and Philip Thomas, *Postpsychiatry: Mental Health in a Postmodern World* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p.236

The task of this chapter is to unpack features of the discourse of psychiatry and to relate these to the central question of how past experiences of childhood sexual abuse can have the status of belonging in Christian communities, given the influence of the clinical discourse on popular understandings. I will be considering how the clinical literature might impact on the kinds of meanings an abused woman is able to give to her experiences, and the significance of the processes involved in attributing these meanings. Ultimately, I will argue that the discourse of psychiatry is one that does not facilitate the hearing of women's voices about their experiences of abuse and therefore their belonging in community, but rather silences and isolates them further.

In the first section of the chapter, I will give an overview of literature presented in publications within psychology and psychiatry, identifying themes in this literature that are important when considering questions of how abused women might find a voice and a place to speak their experience in a meaningful way. In the second section, I will critique the language used in these descriptions of the impact of child sexual abuse, questioning the perceived needs, benefits, and functions of the diagnosing of abused women. In the third section, I will look at what this literature reveals about the power dynamics between mental health professionals and the abused women who they believe they are treating. I will question the extent to which the authors of this literature show their awareness of these dynamics, and the implications that could result from these unacknowledged dynamics.

A View from the Literature

The volume of clinical literature on the impact of childhood sexual abuse on women is so vast that giving a comprehensive overview of the literature would be a task far beyond the scope of one chapter. It would also be extremely repetitive, as the many papers on this topic reinforce each other, situated within similar frameworks and using similar assumptions and methodologies, and therefore reaching similar conclusions. In this section of the chapter, I will look in detail at three papers, all of which are papers that offer a review of clinical research over different periods of time into the impact of childhood sexual abuse. Since each of these papers is a survey of research conducted in successive time periods, they give an indication of clinical opinions and understandings

about the impact of childhood sexual abuse during each of these successive time periods, and how these understandings developed over time.

The first of these is Angela Browne and David Finkelhor's paper, "Impact of Child Sexual Abuse: A Review of the Research."[2] Their paper marks a particularly significant point in research on child sexual abuse, reviewing the research conducted in this area up to 1986, so covering the time period during which the widespread occurrence of child sexual abuse began to be recognised. Finkelhor has been an influential voice in research into the perpetration and impact of child sexual abuse. A sociologist who has published extensively on the topic of child sexual abuse, Finkelhor is director of the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire. His research – in particular his books *Sexually Victimised Children* (1979) and *Child Sexual Abuse: New Theory and Research* (1984) – continues to be cited in a wide range of literature on child sexual abuse.[3]

The second paper, Melissa A. Polusny and Victoria M. Follette's "Long-term Correlates of Child Sexual Abuse: Theory and Review of the Empirical Literature"[4], consciously picks up from where Browne and Finkelhor's paper ends. It was written with the intention of reviewing research carried out since the publication of their 1986 review, and covers research up to 1995. The third paper I will look at is Frank W. Putman's "Ten Year Research Update: Child Sexual Abuse"[5], which reviews articles from 1989 to 2002 that contain empirical research on child sexual abuse.

---

[2] Angela Browne and David Finkelhor, "Impact of Child Sexual Abuse: A Review of the Research", *Psychological Bulletin* 99, no. 1 (1986), pp.66-77

[3] As well as being widely cited in sociological and in psychiatric literature, Finkelhor's work is also refered to frequently in theological work on child sexual abuse. Finkelhor's *Child Sexual Abuse* is cited in the CTBI (Churches Together in Britain and Ireland) publication *Time for Action: Sexual Abuse, the Churches, and a New Dawn for Survivors* (London: Church House Publishing, 2002), pp. 93-96; it is also acknowledged in Carolyn Holderread Heggen, *Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes and Churches* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993). This book, together with Finkelhor's *Sexually Victimized Children* (New York: Free Press, 1979) are both referenced in the bestselling book by Ellen Bass and Laura Davis, *The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse* (London: Random House, 2002), and *Sexually Victimized Children* is also referenced in Annie Imbens and Ineke Jonker's *Christianity and Incest*, trans. Patricia McVay (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992). Heggen's *Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes and Churches* and Catherine Clark Kreoger and James R. Beck (eds.), *Women, Abuse, and the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker books, 1993) also reference Finkelhor's (also co-authored with Angela Browne, and Sharon Araji, Larry Baron, Stefanie Doyle Peters and Gail Elizabeth Wyatt), *Sourcebook on Child Sexual Abuse* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1984).

[4] Melissa A. Polusny and Victoria M. Follette, "Long-term Correlates of Child Sexual Abuse: Theory and Review of the Empirical Literature" *Applied and Preventative Psychology* 4 (1995), pp.143-166.

[5] Frank W. Putman, "Ten-Year Research Update Review: Child Sexual Abuse" *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 42, no. 3 (March 2003), pp.269-278

Angela Browne and David Finkelhor, and the "Impact of Child Sexual Abuse"

Browne and Finkelhor's paper sets out to review empirical literature on both the initial and the long-term effects of child sexual abuse, comparing the findings of research studies into particular ways in which the clinical literature has suggested women are impacted by abuse.[6] Under the initial effects, the authors look at studies into emotional reactions and self-perceptions, physical consequences and somatic complaints, effects on sexuality, and effects on social functioning. Under the long-term effects, the categories used are the same, with the exception that the category of physical consequences and somatic complaints is not listed as a long-term effect, and the additional category of "impact on interpersonal relating" is discussed here. In summarising the empirical research available at their time of writing, they note that it must be considered as "sketchy"[7], due to the research into this topic being in its infancy.

By "initial impact", the authors clarify their understanding of this term as meaning the effects observed within two years of the termination of the abuse. Looking at "emotional reactions and self-perceptions", their summary of the literature's findings is that in terms of initial impact, children who have been sexually abused are more likely to be "emotionally disturbed"[8], with specific reactions listed as fear, anger, hostility, guilt, shame, depression and low self-esteem. One study they cite, a study conducted by researchers at the Division for Child Psychiatry at the Tufts New England Medical Center, shows differences in "pathology" according to age groups, with almost a fifth of the 4-6 year olds in the study meeting the criteria for "clinically significant pathology." This, Browne and Finkelhor note, means that this group "demonstrat[es] more overall disturbance than a normal population but less than the norms for other children their age who were in psychiatric care."[9] In this same study, the highest rate (40%) of

[6] The authors state that their review is limited to research on "female victims", due to the small number of studies that had been conducted at this point in time on men who had been sexually abused (Browne and Finkelhor, "Impact of Child Sexual Abuse", p.66). They identify the problem of the findings of the studies they are able to review at this date (1986) being applied to men and women without differentiation, as many studies do not state which effects are more likely for men and which are more likely for women. However, they state, "we believe that most of the sequelae described relate primarily to women" (p.66, note 1).
[7] p.69
[8] p.66
[9] p.68

"psychopathology" was found in the 7-14 age group, with a lower rate among adolescent victims.

Physical consequences are described as "symptoms indicative of anxiety and distress" – sleep disturbances and eating disturbances, as well as pregnancy. Sexually abused children are also said to be more likely to exhibit inappropriate sexual behaviour, and in terms of social functioning, to have more difficulties at school, including truancy and leaving school early, be more likely to run away from home, and more likely to marry earlier to escape the abuse.

The section on long-term effects, starting with emotional reactions and self perceptions, begins with the observation: "In the clinical literature, depression is the symptom most commonly reported among adults molested as children, and empirical findings seem to confirm this."[10] The authors also claim that studies show "an association between childhood sexual abuse and suicide ideation or deliberate attempts at self-harm."[11] Other reactions listed are "symptoms of anxiety and tension", low self-esteem, and a continued feeling of isolation, alienation, and stigmatization.[12] Under the heading of "impact on interpersonal relating", the authors' review of research studies is that these studies show a tendency of abuse victims to have difficulty trusting others, to have negative feelings towards their parents and their abuser, and to experience fear, hostility and a sense of betrayal in relationships, which is thought to be more likely in relationships with men than with women. Studies are also said to suggest that women who have been sexually abused are more likely to have difficulties parenting their own children, and are more likely to be revictimized and abused physically and sexually in later relationships.

Under "effects on sexuality", the authors see the research as showing a consensus that victims of sexual abuse are likely to have problems with "sexual adjustment."[13] Studies have reached different conclusions on issues of promiscuity, with some concluding that sexually abused women are likely to be more sexually promiscuous, and some concluding no such association. In terms of effects on social functioning, the

[10] p.69
[11] p.69
[12] p.70
[13] p.71

authors claim that research has provided empirical support for the view that a history of sexual abuse is associated with later prostitution, and alcohol and drug abuse. Regarding the long-term effects of child sexual abuse, Browne and Finkelhor conclude, "Adult women victimized as children are more likely to manifest depression, self-destructive behavior, anxiety, feelings of isolation and stigma, poor self-esteem, a tendency towards revictimization, and substance abuse."[14]

The authors then go on to look at research into different types of abuse, relationship between offender and victim, and differences in responses to disclosure, looking at these things as factors that influence both the initial and the long-term impact of abuse. Their conclusion from reviewing this research is that there is no agreement on a particular factor that is consistently associated with a more negative outcome in terms of the impact on the victim. However, they maintain that there are tentative indications that abuse by fathers or stepfathers, abuse involving genital contact, abuse involving force, abuse by men rather than women, and abuse by adults rather than teenagers, are all likely to make the impact of abuse more severe. The impact of abuse may be worse in cases when families are not supportive of the victim, or when the victim is removed from the family home.

As a summary statement on the impact of child sexual abuse, Browne and Finkelhor write, "as evidence now accumulates, it conveys a clear suggestion that sexual abuse is a serious mental health problem, consistently associated with very disturbing subsequent problems in some important portion of its victims."[15]

Melissa A. Polusny and Victoria M. Follette, and the "Long-term correlates of child sexual abuse"

Polusney and Follette's 1995 publication was written with the intention of reviewing the empirical literature on the impact of child sexual abuse since the publication of Browne and Finkelhor's 1986 review.[16] The abstract states,

> Sexually abused subjects report higher levels of general psychological distress and higher rates of both major psychological disorders and personality disorders

[14] p.72
[15] p.72
[16] Polusny and Follette, "Long-term Correlates of Child Sexual Abuse", p.143

> than nonabused subjects. In addition, child sexual abuse survivors report higher rates of substance abuse, binge eating, somatisation, and suicidal behaviors than nonabused subjects. Adult survivors of child sexual abuse report poorer social and interpersonal relationship functioning, greater sexual dissatisfaction, dysfunction and maladjustment including high-risk sexual behavior, and a greater tendency toward revictimization through adult sexual assault and physical partner violence.[17]

The authors look firstly at headings that they group under "psychological distress", under which they discuss findings of research studies into the prevelance of "general psychological distress, depression, self-harming behaviors, anxiety, substance abuse, eating disorders, dissociation and memory impairment, somotization, and personality disorders." Summarising the research, Polusney and Follette conclude that childhood sexual abuse is associated with "higher levels of general psychological distress." They write, "Compared to nonabused subjects, sexual abuse survivors appear to be at greater risk for the development of psychological disorders, including major depression and anxiety disorders."[18]

The research they are reviewing points, they observe, to associations between child sexual abuse and suicidal (including thoughts of suicide and suicide attempts) and self-mutilating behaviours, as well as a "strong association", shown by several studies, between child sexual abuse and subsequent substance abuse. The authors see research into eating disorders and dissociation and memory impairment as being less conclusive. They see the research as providing mixed results for an association between child sexual abuse and eating disorders, although providing some evidence for a link with more severe characteristics of bulimia. Research on dissociation and memory impairment has, the authors argue, failed to take into account that a majority of those sampled had also experienced physical abuse, and so a claim of a link specifically to sexual abuse was weakened. Concluding the section on psychological distress, Polusney and Follette identify a link shown by the research between child sexual abuse and the development of personality disorders, in particular borderline personality disorder in women.[19]

The second section of the paper reviews the empirical literature that examines the relation between child sexual abuse and interpersonal functioning. In this section, the

[17] p.143
[18] p.153
[19] pp.153, 154

impact of abuse is grouped under the headings: social and relationship functioning, sexual satisfaction and adjustment, high-risk sexual behavior, and revictimization.[20] The authors' summary of this research is tentative and inconclusive; they write, "empirical research has suggested that sexual abuse survivors may experience difficulties in a number of interpersonal relationship contexts."[21] They do however suggest that the research shows some link between child sexual abuse and high-risk sexual behaviour as adults, and between abuse and the likelihood of later revictimization in the form of physical and/or sexual abuse by a partner.

Polusny and Follette frame their paper within a conceptual framework based on a theory of emotional avoidance.[22] This theory, they write, "suggests that behavioral strategies are employed to temporarily avoid or alleviate negative abuse-related internal experiences." These strategies stem from an "unwillingness to experience unpleasant internal events such as, thoughts, memories, and affective states associated with an abuse history, and subsequent attempts to reduce, numb, or alleviate these negatively self-evaluated internal experiences."[23] Each of the impacts identified in the review of the literature is then briefly explored in these terms, conceptualised as forms of emotional avoidance.

Frank W. Putman's "Ten-Year Research Update Review"

Putman's paper was written with the objective of providing up to date information for clinicians on the prevelance, risk factors, outcomes, treatment and prevention of child sexual abuse, and it reviews articles published from 1989 to 2002. Putman begins his paper with the statement, "Childhood sexual abuse is a complex life experience, not a diagnosis or a disorder."[24] He emphasises the diversity of the activities that are encompassed by the term "child sexual abuse", as well as the diversity of outcomes seen in children who have been abused, concluding that it is difficult to make any general statements about sexually abused children.

[20] pp.154-157
[21] p157
[22] pp.143; 158-160
[23] p.158
[24] Putman, "Ten-Year Research Update Review", p.269

Putman begins by looking at the epidemiology of child sexual abuse, discussing changes over time in rates of reporting abuse. He then discusses factors that contribute to a child's being at a higher risk of sexual abuse, summarising from the research to date that girls are up to three times more likely than boys to be sexually abused. He notes that there is also a greater risk of abuse within particular age brackets, with the under-three age bracket being the lowest risk, and the twelve-and-above age bracket being the highest risk.[25] Physical and intellectual disabilities are also identified as factors that increase the risk of abuse, with some research indicating that this increases the risk of the abuse of boys in particular. An especially significant risk factor is identified as being the absence of one or both parents, with the presence of a stepfather in the family home doubling the risk of the sexual abuse of girls – not just abuse by the stepfather, but by other men who were present prior to the stepfather's presence in the home.[26] Other risk factors associated with the family situation are thought to include substance abuse, social isolation, and punitive parenting, and the illness or absence of the mother. Putman concludes from the research reviewed that neither socioeconomic status, nor race and ethnicity, have been shown to be significant risk factors, though also notes that it is more likely that cases of abuse from lower socioeconomic classes will be reported to child protection services.[27]

Putman then addresses research on the outcomes that have been associated with childhood sexual abuse. He opens this section with these words,

> A variety of adult psychiatric conditions have been clinically associated with CSA [childhood sexual abuse]. These include the DSM [Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders] disorders of major depression, borderline personality disorder, somatization disorder, substance abuse disorders, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), dissociative identity disorder, and bulimia nervosa.[28]

He proceeds then to look at "three basic categories of outcomes", which he names as psychiatric disorders, dysfunctional disorders, and neurobiological dysregulation.[29]

---

[25] Putman cites a study by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that indicates approximately 10% of sexually abused children are in the zero to three years age bracket, 28.4% are aged between four and seven, 25.5% are aged between eight and eleven, and the remaining 35.9% are aged twelve and above (p.270).
[26] p.271
[27] p.270
[28] p.271
[29] p.271

Although Putman sees that the research links childhood sexual abuse with all the psychiatric disorders listed above, he chooses to focus on the research that links abuse with major depression, taking the research into this as "a useful example of the converging lines of evidence linking a history of CSA to serious adult psychiatric psychopathology."[30] Putman summarises that the research shows a strong link between child sexual abuse and depression, depression that is more likely to be prolonged and difficult to treat.[31] He acknowledges the complexity of establishing a relationship between the depression and "other disorders and certain symptoms"[32], with factors such as physical contact in abuse, age of onset, relationship with the perpetrator, duration of abuse, and the use of physical force. However, he sees the research pointing to worse outcomes for those who were abused by someone with whom they already had a close relationship, as well as worse outcomes in cases of sexual abuse that involves physical contact.

Putman notes that the research he is reviewing shows that people who have been sexually abused, "irrespective of their psychiatric diagnosis, manifest significant problems with affect regulation, impulse control, somatization, sense of self, cognitive distortions, and problems with socialization."[33] He concludes that this group of symptoms that often occur together in people who have been abused are "best conceptualised by the proposed diagnosis of disorders of extreme stress not otherwise specified (DESNOS)"[34], the characteristics of which "best accounts for the adult effects of childhood sexual abuse."[35]

Under "dysfunctional disorders", Putman states that while a number of behavioural problems have been associated with a history of child abuse (of any kind), it is the exhibiting of sexualized behaviors that has been most closely linked with child sexual abuse. The research Putman reviews points to these behaviours' being more

[30] p.271
[31] p.272
[32] p.272
[33] p.273
[34] p.274
[35] p.274. The characteristics of DESNOS are listed as: (1) altered affect regulation such as persistent dysphoria, chronic suicidal preoccupation, and explosive or inhibited anger; (2) transient alterations of consciousness, such as flashbacks and dissociative episodes; (3) altered self-perceptions including helplessness, shame, guilt, and self-blame; (4) altered relationships with others, such as persistent distrust, withdrawal, failures of self protection, and rescuer fantasies; (5) altered systems of meanings, including loss of sustaining faith, hopelessness and despair; and (6) somitization.

pronounced in younger children, and in children abused at younger ages, but it also suggests a higher rate of adolescent pregnancy among girls who had previously been sexually abused.[36] Discussing "neurobiological sequelae of CSA", Putman cites studies that suggest neurological differences in sexually abused children in comparison to nonabused children, but he recognises that this research is in its early stages, and identifies a need for further research in this area.[37]

Turning to an overview of findings on treatments for children who have been sexually abused, Putman sees the research as showing that cognitive behavioural therapy for the child and the non-offending parent is indicated as the "best-documented, effective treatments for CSA."[38] He then discusses research findings on the success of the prevention of child sexual abuse through child education programmes and home visitation programmes. Finally, he identifies future directions for research, pointing in particular to the methodological limitations of research studies, the need for much larger-scale research, and the need to establish the relationship between neurobiological abnormalities and the symptoms and behaviours associated with childhood sexual abuse.[39]

Meaning as Diagnosis: Looking at the Language in the Literature

The purpose of this section is to identify and question the language that the literature looked at above uses to ascribe particular kinds of meanings to the experiences of the abused person in the aftermath of childhood sexual abuse. I will identify features of this language that betray underlying assumptions that I will argue are inappropriate to the task of interpreting and speaking about childhood sexual abuse, specifically when the concern is the ways in which women with experiences of childhood sexual abuse may later belong in community. With this same concern in mind, I will also consider the implications of the way in which the experience of abuse is ascribed meaning by these researchers. It is not the task of this chapter to produce a historical critique of the discipline of psychiatry. Delving into the history of why this discourse has come to speak in the way that it does is both interesting and valuable, but the task here is simply

[36] p.272
[37] pp.272-273; 276
[38] p.275
[39] p.276

to unpack how and why the clinical discourse on child sexual abuse is not an appropriate or helpful vocabulary to be adopted when the task is one of finding a place of belonging in Christian communities for women who have been sexually abused in childhood.

Negative difference

The first point to make is that in these papers, the aftermath of child sexual abuse is thought of in purely negative terms. Polusny and Follette write, "The empirical literature demonstrates that childhood sexual trauma can produce intense and pervasive negative internal experiences."[40] While not necessarily disputing the accuracy of this statement, I would question the helpfulness or appropriateness of ascribing *solely* negative significance to the later experiences of an adult who has been sexually abused in childhood. None of the papers sets out with the articulated intention of exploring only negative effects; they are presented as reviews of research into the impact of child sexual abuse, without any qualification that they are reviewing research into only the negative impacts.[41] It is interesting then that these authors, and presumably the research they are reviewing, choose to focus exclusively on negative impacts without acknowledging that this is what they are doing. Their doing so is indicative of a mindset and methodological assumption according to which the persons they study and with whom they come into contact in their professional lives are to be viewed negatively. This mindset and assumption is unacknowledged by these researchers, raising the question as to whether or not they are aware of the fact that the assumption of negativity shapes their view of the people who are the subjects of this research.

Browne and Finkelhor, discussing eight community studies of adults sexually abused as children, state, "Although impairments in these nonclinical victims are not necessarily severe, all the studies that have looked for long-term impairment have found it."[42] In response to this statement, there is a methodological issue that if a study sets out to look for a particular feature, its finding that feature may be more to do with the approach of the study than with the significance of the feature. Putman's paper, too, sets

[40] Polusny and Follette, "Long-term Correlates of Child Sexual Abuse", p.157
[41] Putman's paper does state an objective "To examine the best-documented examples of psychopathology attributable to CSA", but this is secondary to its primary objective, which is concerned with the "outcomes", without positive or negative qualification (Putman, "Ten-Year Research Update Review", p.269). However, no positive outcomes are recognised anywhere in the paper.
[42] Browne and Finkelhor, "Impact of Child Sexual Abuse", p.72

out to present research that provides examples for "three basic categories of outcomes" of childhood sexual abuse, and names these three basic outcomes as "psychiatric disorders, dysfunctional behaviors, and neurobiological dysregulation."[43] Again, for him to have decided that what he will look for is evidence of disorder, dysfunction and dysregulation determines that this is what his research will pick up on. It is also interesting for him to have named these as the "three basic categories of outcomes" that he will be considering, when the paper had opened with the claim that childhood sexual abuse "is a complex life experience, *not* a diagnosis or a disorder." Despite this initial claim, he then goes on to discuss its outcomes solely in terms of diagnoses and disorders.

Psychiatrist Judith Lewis Herman's book *Trauma and Recovery* contains a chapter headed "Child Abuse", which is located within a section named "Traumatic Disorders". Its location within a framework named as a study of disorders implies that it is from this perspective that she intends to view experiences of and reactions to child abuse – in terms of their belonging in a category of "disorder". Herman outlines "the many symptoms of post-traumatic disorder", categorising them as hyperarousal, intrusion, and constriction, and then exploring these as symptoms of post-traumatic disorder. She writes, "the repetition of trauma amplifies all the hyperarousal symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. Chronically traumatized people are continually hypervigilant, anxious, and agitated."[44] It would have been possible to have taken these characteristics just as descriptive terms, but for Herman they are received as evidence for a disorder. And, as in the case of the studies reviewed by the papers summarized above, she finds symptoms of the disorder she has decided to focus on because she is looking for symptoms of that disorder.[45]

But, beyond the methodological criticism, there is a moral point to be made concerning the pessimism and negativity of the researchers towards people who have been sexually abused. It is not obviously morally justifiable for a researcher (indeed any person) to look at another person in this way – in a way that decides in advance that he or

[43] Putman, "Ten-Year Research Update Review", p.271
[44] Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (London: Pandora, 2001), p.86
[45] The same approach can be seen in Michael R. Nash et al, "Long-Term Sequalae of Childhood Sexual Abuse: Perceived Family Enviornment, Psychopathology, and Dissociation", *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 61, no. 2 (1993), "In this study, 105 abused and nonabused women were examined for patterns of adult psychopathology associated with childhood sexual abuse" (p.276). Unsurprisingly, patterns of adult psychopathology were what the researchers found.

she will search only for ways in which that person falls short of or deviates from what is considered to be normal.

Neither Browne and Finkelhor's nor Polusny and Follette's papers contains a single positive statement about, or description of, people who have been sexually abused. Putman's paper, in recognising that there are "asymptomatic children" (those children who "present with few or no symptoms"), in any case recommends psychiatric intervention for these children.[46] He seems reluctant to believe in the possibility of sexually abused children coping well, and even thriving, after sexual abuse without the intervention of a psychiatrist to help them to do so. People who have been sexually abused, who have been regarded with negativity and disdain by their abusers often for years on end, do not deserve to be looked at in this way by professionals researching their experiences. [47] The assumptions with which psychiatric professionals operate may be an inevitable feature of a clinical context, but it is one that entails that women who have been sexually abused will likely only be seen negatively in this context. After all they have experienced already, the practice of then pronouncing negative judgements onto them adds more insult to what is already very serious injury.

There is an assumption running throughout these papers, and by implication in the research they are reviewing, that people who have been sexually abused are to be thought of as different to the population at large, and different in a way that is to be

[46] Putman, "Ten-Year Research Update Review", p.274

[47] The practice of discussing in wholly negative terms the later lives of people who have been sexually abused as children is pervasive in this literature. Amy B. Silverman, Helen Z. Reinherz and Rose M. Giaconia's paper, "The Long-Term Sequalae of Child and Adolescent Abuse: A Longitudinal Community Study", for example, identifies its own aim in terms that are not obviously negative, "The purpose of the present study was to examine the relationship between childhood and adolescent physical and sexual abuse before the age of 18 and psychosocial functioning in mid-adolescence (age 15) and early adulthood (age 21) in a representative community study of young adults" (Silverman et al, "The Long-Term Sequalae of Child and Adolescent Abuse", *Child Abuse and Neglect*.20, no.8 (1996), p.709). However, the paper then discusses the sequelae of childhood sexual abuse only in terms of "syndrome", "somatic complaints", "social problems, thought problems, attention problems, delinquent behaviour, and aggressive behaviour", "depressive symptomology", "anxiety", and "suicidal ideation" (pp.712-719). At no point in the paper is there any positive statement about these individuals' functioning.
In the case of those studies that specify that they are considering the impact of childhood sexual abuse as it has been associated with a particular class of psychiatric disorder, the sole focus on pathology is understandable: Erica L. Weiss, James G. Longhurst and Carolyn M. Mazure, "Childhood Sexual Abuse as a Risk Factor for Depression in Women: Psychosocial and Neurobiological Correlates", *American Journal of Psychiatry* 156, no. 6 (June 1999), pp.816-828; Jacqueline C. Carter et al, "The Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse in Anorexia Nervosa", *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 30 (2006), pp.257-269; Gabriele S. Leverich et al, "Early Physical and Sexual Abuse Associated with an Adverse Course of Bipolar Illness", *Biological Psychiatry*, 51 (2002), pp.288-297. However, in those studies that do not specify such a focus, and yet concentrate only on these pathological aspects, an unacknowledged assumption of negativity is betrayed.

conceived of negatively. At a number of points throughout Browne and Finkelhor's paper, the samples of sexually abused children or adults are contrasted with what are referred to as "a normal population."[48] The samples of people who have been sexually abused are described as deviant[49] and impaired[50] in comparison to this "normal" population, to which it is assumed they do not belong. Polusny and Follette also use language of impairment,[51] along with disordered[52] and maladjusted[53], in comparing people who have been abused with people who have not. This implies an assumption, not acknowledged, of a standard of normality that these people do not fit.

The rejection of the possibility of positive meaning with regards expressions of suffering, of anger, or of protest against abuse and injustice, also entails a failure to recognise the nature of the acts of abuse that have been inflicted, and a failure to express outrage, sadness, or resistance in the face of these acts. This failure constitutes a loss to any community, but it does so in a particular way in a Christian community. This community, in a way that others may not, has the potential to see and hear in the

[48] Browne and Finkelhor, "Impact of Child Sexual Abuse". The authors set up the contrast in these terms twice on p.68, again on p.69, and twice on p.72. See also Nash et al, "Long-Term Sequalae of Childhood Sexual Abuse", in which abused women are compared with "nonabused-nonclinical, or normal controls, women who reported having not been sexually abused and who were not in treatment" (p.277); H. Steiger and M. Zanko, "Sexual Traumata among Eating-Disordered, Psychiatric, and Normal Female Groups: Comparison of Prevalences and Defense Styles", *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 5 (1990), pp. 74–86; Weiss, Longhurst and Mazure, "Childhood Sexual Abuse as a Risk Factor for Depression in Women", in which women who have been sexually abused and subsequently given psychiatric diagnoses are compared with "normal subjects" (pp.820, 824).
Roland Summit's paper "The Child Sexual Abuse Accommodation Syndrome", *Child Abuse and Neglect* 7 (1983), pp.177-193, specifically criticises this use of language, loaded as it is with counterproductive assumptions about what is appropriate behaviour. Summit writes, "The normal coping behavior of the child contradicts the entrenched beliefs and expectations typically held by adults, stigmatizing the child with charges of lying, manipulating or imagining from parents, courts and clinicians…Evaluation of the responses of normal children to sexual assault provides clear evidence that societal definitions of "normal" victim behavior are inappropriate and procrustean, serving adults as mythic insulators against the child's pain. Within this climate of prejudice, the sequential survival options available to the victim further alienate the child from any hope of outside credibility or acceptance." (p.177)
[49] Browne and Finkelhor, "Impact of Child Sexual Abuse", p.76
[50] Browne and Finkelhor, "Impact of Child Sexual Abuse", pp.72, 74, 75. Lex L. Merrill et al, "Predicting the Impact of Child Sexual Abuse on Women: The Role of Abuse Severity, Parental Support, and Coping Strategies", *Journal of Counsulting and Clinical Psychology* 69, no. 6 (2001) pp.992-1006, Nash et al, "Long-Term Sequalae of Childhood Sexual Abuse", Silverman, et al, "The Long-Term Sequalae of Child and Adolescent Abuse" also uses the terminology of "impairment" throughout.
[51] Polusny and Follette, "Long-term Correlates of Child Sexual Abuse", p.145
[52] Polusny and Follette, "Long-term Correlates of Child Sexual Abuse", p.148-154
[53] Polusny and Follette, "Long-term Correlates of Child Sexual Abuse", p.155. Amanda C. Kallstrom-Fuqua, Linda L. Marshall and Rebecca Weston, "Childhod and Adolescent Sexual Abuse of Community Women: Mediated Effects on Psychological Distress and Social Relationships", *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 72, no. 6 (2004), pp.980-992 also makes use of this terminology, as does Janet Surrey et al, "Reported History of Physical and Sexual Abuse and Severity of Symptomology in Women Psychiatric Outpatients", *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 60, no. 3 (July 1990), pp.412-417, which identifies "adjustment disorders" as one of the categories of psychiatric diagnosis that outpatient sexually abused women may be given (p.415).

expressions of abused women and children, a prophetic voice that pronounces abuse and injustice for what it is, and in anger and sadness stands in opposition to it. If a Christian community instead complies with the declaration of these voices as deviant and diseased, it could be charged with rejecting the status and function within its own tradition of voices that speak pain and anger against oppression. They could also miss hearing the message that these voices bring – a message that reminds the Christian community of its commitment to a God who loves justice. These are points that will be developed further in chapter five.

The medical renaming of experience

The second point to make about the language in the clinical literature is concerned with the non-critical medicalising of the experience of abuse; that is, the fact that the impacts of abuse are translated and presented as medical phenomenon. The research reviewed in these papers frames the impact of abuse in terms of psychopathology, and lists the effects of abuse as one medical disorder and behavioural dysfunction after another. Polusny and Follette list as the impact of child sexual abuse a litany of disorders to be understood as features of the individual who has been abused.[54] In summarising the research on the impact of child sexual abuse, Browne and Finkelhor write, "as evidence now accumulates, it conveys a clear suggestion that sexual abuse is a serious mental health problem."[55]

The renaming of experiences as medical phenomena involves a number of assumptions that can be criticised on several levels. Patrick Bracken and Philip Thomas' book *Postpsychiatry: Mental Heath in a Postmodern World*, is a critique of many of the practices of psychiatry in the twenty-first century, and looks in particular at the practice of interpreting madness as a medical condition. They write, "A medical diagnosis puts a name on a patient's condition. However, it does more. It brings to bear an explanatory framework through which the emergence of the symptoms and signs of the illness makes sense."[56] Questions to be asked of this process of diagnosing a person's experiences and reactions in the aftermath of sexual abuse include questions about the assumptions made

[54] Polusny and Follette, "Long-term Correlates of Child Sexual Abuse", p.143
[55] Browne and Finkelhor, "Impact of Child Sexual Abuse", p.72
[56] Bracken and Thomas, *Postpsychiatry*, p.106

in this particular naming process, and what implications this naming process might have for a person looking for ways to articulate their experiences of abuse in a meaningful way.

Bracken and Thomas, discussing the practice in psychiatry of describing and ordering symptoms according to the discipline's own categories, argue that this process involves a fundamental assumption, "that our lived psychological realities *can* be described and ordered in the very same way that our physical symptoms and bodily processes can."[57] They question this assumption on the grounds that the treatment interventions used in psychiatry "are not, in reality, simply based on detached objective science."[58]

Looking at the influence of the drug industry on psychiatry, Bracken and Thomas consider how this industry, with its claims to 'cure' mental illness, accrued the power to shape how those prescribing its products framed the experiences of those swallowing those products, so that both doctors and patients performed these roles in the belief that the patients' problems and their solution had its basis in biochemistry, "many doctors were happy to tell patients that their painful moods were due to a 'chemical imbalance' even though there was no real scientific basis for this claim."[59] Clinical psychologist Lucy Johnstone, makes the point that almost every condition named by psychiatry "is described and treated as an illness with an organic cause although none has ever been discovered."[60]

The features of the thoughts, feelings, words, behaviours of women who have been sexually abused, when passed through a methodological framework that it has been decided is scientific, become features that have an underlying biochemical cause. That such cause has never been established by these scientific methodologies appears to be irrelevant. The mindset and framework within which these women's lives are hypothesized determines that an organic cause is more likely than any other, because within this framework and mindset it is only organic causes that are granted recognition and credibility. It is a framework that excludes from the outset any other way of

[57] Bracken and Thomas, *Postpsychiatry*, p.110
[58] Bracken and Thomas, *Postpsychiatry*, p.168
[59] Bracken and Thomas, *Postpsychiatry*, p.174
[60] Lucy Johnstone, *Users and Abusers of Psychiatry: A Critical Look at Psychiatric Practice* (Philadelphia, PA: Routledge, 2000), p.76

interpreting these women's lives (and this includes the women's own interpretations), deciding as it has that all understandings will be scientific understandings.

In *Bias in Psychiatric Diagnosis*, psychologists Paula J. Caplan and Lisa Cosgrove bring together a collection of perspectives on how factors such as gender, race, class, age, disability and sexuality influence psychiatry's classification of persons into diagnostic categories, and the consequences of this practice for those who have been classified in this way. In the first chapter, the editors question the basis for psychiatric diagnosis, making the point that psychiatric diagnosis is "surprisingly unwarranted by scientific research."[61] The power of psychiatry to name, Caplan and Cosgrove attribute to its "aura of scientific precision, objectivity, and professionalism", when in fact no such scientific precision or objectivity has ever been established with regard to almost all the diagnostic categories used by psychiatry.[62]

With regard to the lack of a biochemical basis for psychiatry, it is often claimed that psychiatry is an "infant science", and that the scientific evidence for its claims will come with more research.[63] It might. Equally, it might not. In the meantime, psychiatrists proceed with the use of biomedical language, on the unestablished assumption that they are correct to do so. It is significant that their doing so awards them a great deal of professional power. Johnstone makes the point that in making the claim of scientific objectivity, psychiatry is claiming a position as a medical specialism, with all the privileges that such a position brings. If it turned out that psychiatric patients were not suffering from conditions with biochemical causes, "then the whole necessity for a medical training and approach is thrown into question, and the position of psychiatrists becomes untenable."[64] As Johnstone puts it, "What is at issue for the psychiatrists is the whole basis of their claim for domination of the field of mental health."[65]

[61] Paula J. Caplan and Lisa Cosgrove, "Is This Really Necessary?" in Paula J. Caplan and Lisa Cosgrove (eds.), *Bias in Psychiatric Diagnosis* (Lanham, MD; Oxford: Jason Aronson, 2004), p.xix
[62] Caplan and Cosgrove, "Is This Really Necessary?", p.xix
[63] David Ingleby, *Critical Psychiatry: The Politics of Mental Health* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), p.7
[64] Johnstone, *Users and Abusers of Psychiatry*, pp.76-77
[65] Johnstone, *Users and Abusers of Psychiatry*, p.76

Diagnosis and context

> I am the symptom of something outside, the cause is outside, whereas they would see the cause as me and if they solved me, solved my problem, then everybody else is all right.
>
> Psychiatric inpatient, cited by Johnstone[66]

The assumption that Bracken and Thomas identified as fundamental to the practice of classifying a patient's own descriptions of his or her experiences into symptoms of a disease – the assumption that it is justifiable to describe and order psychological realities in the same way that physical realities can be ordered – gives rise to a secondary assumption. This secondary assumption that Bracken and Thomas identify is, "that psychological events can be reliable and accurately described in *isolation* from the meaningful context in which they emerge and have significance."[67] This assumption can also be seen in the literature on the impact of child sexual abuse, with consequences that I will argue have the potential to cause a great deal of harm.

To frame experiences in a way that is divorced from their contexts is probably less than ideal with regard to any experience that may have been named a "mental health problem." For this assumption to be inflicted on a woman who has been sexually abused has the more problematic implication that an experience that is absolutely the fault of another person, is redescribed in a way that reduces this experience to a problem, "impairment", "disorder", that is located inside the woman who has been abused, or in terms of "maladjustment", without any mention of what it is to which these women have been forced to adjust.

For example, Lex. L. Merrill et al, "Predicting the Impact of Child Sexual Abuse on Women"[68], claim, "CSA is associated…with poor psychological adjustment", and then, "CSA victims are less well adjusted than nonvictims."[69], but fail to consider the different circumstances in which "victims" and "nonvictims" have been and are situated. The term "adjustment" implies a reaction to circumstances, and if the circumstances of two persons are hugely different, it simply makes little sense to judge the two in the same way.

---

[66] Johnstone, *Users and Abusers of Psychiatry*, p.37
[67] Bracken and Thomas, *Postpsychiatry*, p.110, italics in original.
[68] Lex. L. Merrill et al, "Predicting the Impact of Child Sexual Abuse on Women", pp.992-1006
[69] Merrill et al, "Predicting the Impact of Child Sexual Abuse on Women", pp.992, 997

Similarly, Browne and Finkelhor, in listing problems associated with victims of child sexual abuse, present running away from home as a "problem in social functioning."[70] In discussing this, the authors compare the percentage of victims who run away from home with the percentage of nonvictims who run away from home, concluding that the higher percentage in the first group indicates this "problem in social functioning." What they do not do is take into account that the two are running from completely different things. Running away from a happy, well-functioning family home may be well described as a "problem", but running away from a home in which the child is being sexually abused is far from a problem, but is in fact very reasonable behaviour. Describing running away from an abusive home as a "problem in social functioning" also carries with it the disturbing implication that it was wrong for the child in question to have run away, and she/he should really have stayed where she/he was. If there is a "problem in social functioning" somewhere in this situation, it most certainly cannot be attributed to the runaway behaviour of the child, which I would say would seem to be the least problematic aspect of a situation in which sexual abuse is happening.

In the previous section I quoted Browne and Finkelhor's summary of the research they reviewed, "as evidence now accumulates, it conveys a clear suggestion that sexual abuse is a serious mental health problem."[71] In reality, child sexual abuse is a criminal problem, it is a social problem, it is a moral problem, it is a theological problem, it is a political problem. To tackle it in a comprehensive way would be a mammoth task. It would also be emotionally far more demanding.

It could be suggested that this retreat into a framework of psychopathological categories serves to distance and protect those writing or working in this way from the painful realities of the suffering of individuals. Bracken and Thomas argue that the practice of interpreting human experience according to categories of psychopathology rather than entering into the complex, confusing, and painful realities of the contexts of those experiences, "serves the purpose of a coping strategy for the profession, which removes from psychiatrists the obligation to engage with their patients' experiences, other than for the purpose of making a diagnosis."[72] It means that those diagnosing

[70] Browne and Finkelhor, *Impact of Child Sexual Abuse*, p.69
[71] Browne and Finkelhor, "Impact of Child Sexual Abuse", p.72
[72] Bracken and Thomas, *Postpsychiatry*, p.55

sexually abused patients are spared the task of being forced to acknowledge that this abuse has been inflicted within a society that fails to protect the most vulnerable and whose values have created the circumstances in which such abuse is possible.

Neerosh Mudaly and Chris Goddard's *The Truth is Longer Than a Lie*, is a study into what children have said about their own experiences of abuse and about the interventions of legal and mental health professionals. The book takes its title from the observations of a twelve-year-old girl who spoke to the researchers about her experiences of professional counselling. This girl noticed that her counsellor did not want to believe the truth of what had happened to her, and she made the following observation,

> [T]hat's always the problem with these people, they don't want to believe the truth, they just want to believe the easiest side, the side that is easiest to, that is the simplest, basically...so then they get paid and go on to the next one and just pick the simplest out of that. They don't want to hear the truth because the truth is so much harder to understand and so much longer than a lie about the truth.[73]

Initially, the researchers thought this girl's insights and words too sophisticated for her age, and set out to find where they had originally come from. Their search was fruitless, and so they concluded (with regret at having doubted the child in the first place[74]) that these were first hand observations and that a twelve-year-old child had identified in a mental health professional the need for that professional to protect herself by denying the truth of what the child was speaking, replacing this truth with the counsellor's professional account – a "lie about the truth".[75] It is interesting to consider these observations together with Polusny and Follette's statement, "The adult consequences associated with CSA will be conceptualised within a theoretical framework based on a theory of emotional avoidance"[76], since the authors write without the realisation that "emotional avoidance" is a charge that could well be levelled at the framework far more so than at the individuals pathologised within it.

---

[73] Neerosh Mudaly and Chris Goddard, *The Truth is Longer than a Lie* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2006), p.104

[74] Chris Goddard, "The Silencing of Children: The Truth is Longer than a Lie" (paper presented at conference on Sexual Abuse in Religious Contexts, Sydney, Australia, June 20-21, 2008)

[75] Later in the interview, the same child criticises her counsellor for presuming to be able and entitled to tell her what is the case instead of listening to the child do so, asserting, "people like that are supposed to listen, they're not supposed to sit there and tell you what you're thinking or what you're feeling, because that's what she was doing, just sitting there and telling me what's right" (Mudaly and Goddard, *The Truth is Longer than a Lie*, p.104).

[76] Polusny and Follette, "Long-term Correlates of Child Sexual Abuse", p.144

Johnstone makes the point that of those diagnosed with borderline personality disorder, four out of five are women, 68 percent of whom have been sexually abused as children. The symptoms listed under the category of borderline personality disorder are known to be reactions to abuse.[77] Given these facts, Johnstone asks, "What sense does it make to see all these women as suffering from illnesses with biological causes, as opposed to traumas with psychological consequences?"[78] I suggest that it makes a great deal of sense when understood in the light of psychiatry's need to claim a scientific foundation for their discipline, as discussed above, but also when considered as the alternative to having to cope with the details and the implications of women's experiences of sexual abuse.

This charge of "emotional avoidance" of psychiatry can be seen in a number of places. Herman, writing about the creation of the term "dissociation" by mental health professionals, refers to their "searching for a calm precise language."[79] One can question whose interests this task serves – whether a "calm precise language" is helpful or appropriate to a woman who might otherwise articulate her experiences in a chaotic and emotional way, or whether it most benefits professionals who would rather not listen to such an emotional expression and so impose this alien vocabulary onto her experiences. Later in her book, when she comes to look at different stages of recovery that can be identified, Herman remarks of these stages, "They are an attempt to impose simplicity and order upon a process that is inherently turbulent and complex."[80] The same description could be applied to the diagnostic categories – an attempt to impose order onto people living in circumstances that are chaotic and painful.

Johnstone makes a similar point, claiming that the medical model of understanding human distress means that psychiatric staff avoid having to face and share in the enormous amount of pain carried by women who have been mistreated, or consider the social and political questions that would need to be considered if these women's stories were heard as legitimate perspectives rather than symptoms of disorders,

> They can distance themselves from their own hurts, fears and frustrations which might otherwise be stirred up. They do not have to confront the difficult

[77] These same points are also made in Clare Shaw and Gillian Proctor, "Women at the Margins: A Critique of the Diagnosis of Borderline Personality Disorder", *Feminism and Psychology* 15 (2005) pp.483-488
[78] Johnstone, *Users and Abusers of Psychiatry*, p.116
[79] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, p.1
[80] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, p.155

> questions that [a woman's] anguish might raise about their own attitudes, families, beliefs, roles, and the society in which these things take place."[81]

Understanding women's distress as illness could be thought of as an approach that encourages a 'see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil' attitude.

Naming as a mental health problem a woman's reaction to child sexual abuse avoids all of this, for it reduces it to a problem within one group of people – its victims. Unfortunately, in doing so, it shifts the negative attention away from the perpetrators of abuse, and from the social, political and theological structures within which abuse is allowed to be carried out, and places all that negative attention on the victim. This has the consequence of ignoring those people, places, structures, practices and ideologies, where blame could be appropriately identified. Shaw and Proctor are strongly critical of the practice of psychiatric diagnosis because of its failure to recognise the contexts in which women are situated.[82] This results, they argue, in women's responses to distress being pronounced to be sicknesses and defects that are located inside individual women. Shaw and Proctor assert that "the act of psychiatric diagnosis ignores the context of a woman's distress by defining her as individually defective.'"[83] Johnstone makes the same point, stating,

> Diagnoses are attached to individuals – there is no such thing as a medical diagnosis that includes a partner, children, parents or wider society as an equal part of the problem. Thus the woman's belief that it is all her fault, which is preventing her from seeing possible changes and solutions, is reinforced.[84]

A poster produced by the organisation Evolving Minds poses the question, "How sane is it to be well-adapted to a sick society?"[85] Louise Pembroke, who writes as a survivor of encounters with psychiatric services that she depicts as having been extremely negative, poses a similar question in the form of a drawing. The drawing shows a psychiatric nurse and patient, with the nurse (who is three times the size of the patient) remarking, "Your behaviour is <u>not</u> appropriate", with the patient replying, "Appropriate to <u>what</u>?"[86] As psychologists writing from a feminist perspective on mental health care, Laura S. Brown and Mary Ballou argue that indeed there could be

---

[81] Johnstone, *Users and Abusers of Psychiatry*, p.14
[82] Shaw and Proctor, "Women at the Margins", pp.483-490
[83] Shaw and Proctor, "Women at the Margins", p.488
[84] Johnstone, *Users and Abusers of Psychiatry*, p.119
[85] Cited in Bracken and Thomas, *Postpsychiatry*, p247. Evolving Minds is a West Yorkshire-based discussion and campaign group that seeks to encourage "alternative and compassionate approaches to emotional and mental health" (http://www.evolving-minds.co.uk).
[86] Louise Roxanne Pembroke, *Self Harm: Perspectives from Personal Experience* (London: Chipmunka Publishing, 1996), p.16

types of distress that are entirely appropriate to the circumstances to which they are a response, and that "behaviors and experiences that currently reside in the diagnostic manual may, from a feminist perspective, represent healthy strategies for staying alive and sane in dangerous and insane places."[87]

The fact that psychiatric diagnoses ignore the context in which this distress was caused restricts what is possible in terms of future transformation – both individual and social. Psychiatric diagnosis of women who have been sexually abused has the effect of erasing any pathological feature of the abusive environment, and naming her as the problem. Johnstone writes, "What most women with psychiatric diagnoses need is, first, to be helped to see that they are only part of the problem, and second, to get angry enough about it to make some real changes. The medical model cannot allow for this.[88] Psychiatric diagnosis both impedes women's efforts to resist abuse, and obscures the very real problems that exist in the context in which she was abused. This means that psychiatric diagnosis functions to preserve the status quo of those places and mentalities that allow abuse to be perpetrated, as Shaw and Proctor acknowledge: "we not only continue to deny the agency and integrity of people who have already been abused and silenced; we also deny ourselves the grounds for a meaningful movement towards the creation of a more acceptable reality."[89]

Putman, in fact, *does* devote sections of his paper to looking at the social context around the sexual abuse of children. The final section of his paper addresses the prevention of child sexual abuse by looking firstly at research into school-based education programmes – teaching children self-protection and the importance of disclosing sexual abuse to a trusted adult. He then looks also at the role of home visitation programmes designed to alert authorities to children who may be at risk of sexual abuse.[90] Additionally, when discussing research into the treatment of the "disorders" associated with childhood sexual abuse, he concludes that the treatment shown to be most effective is cognitive behavioural therapy for the child and the non-offending parent.[91] This suggests that although he names the effects of child sexual

[87] Laura S. Brown, "Feminist Perspectives on Psychopathology" in Laura S. Brown and Mary Ballou (eds.), *Personality and Psychopathology: Feminist Reappraisals* (New York: Guilford Press, 1992), p.113
[88] Johnstone, *Users and Abusers of Psychiatry*, p.119
[89] Shaw and Proctor, "Women at the Margins", p.488
[90] Putman, "Ten-Year Research Update Review", p.275
[91] Putman, "Ten-Year Research Update Review", pp.274-275

abuse solely in terms of individual pathology attributed to the abused child, he does go further than the earlier papers in recognising the context in which that child is situated. This is a step, then, towards pathologising a dysfunctional and abusive context rather than the child's reaction to that context.

Features that the literature presents as evidence of the illnesses caused by child sexual abuse – features such as sadness, fear, anger, hostility, feelings of isolation – far from being pathological, could be seen as appropriate responses to an external reality in which an individual has been horrifically treated, and her suffering not acknowledged by those she trusted to care for her. To be happy about such events, to feel safe and cared for, to have no anger about such a situation, would surely be less appropriate. Brown suggests that those commonly diagnosed with personality disorders, who tend to be members of oppressed groups, "are manifesting not a disordered personality but a normative, functional, and at times creative (although distressed) response to potentially dangerous situations and oppressive cultural norms."[92]

Rejecting the description of traumatic events given in DSM III (the third revision of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) as being those events that are "outside the range of usual human experience", Judith Lewis Herman rightly points out that traumatic events such as rape, domestic violence and sexual abuse occur so often in the lives of women that they cannot be thought of as extraordinary in this way. She then says, "Traumatic events are extraordinary, not because they occur rarely, but rather because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life."[93] While the point she is trying to make can be appreciated for its effort to bring women's experiences of trauma out of the margins of ordinary human experience, she does so at the cost of naming women's reactions to these kinds of trauma as something out of the ordinary. The phrase "ordinary human adaptation" is not a valueless phrase. The claim that trauma overwhelms "the ordinary human adaptations to life" suggests that the coping strategies used by abused women are to be seen as out of the ordinary. Their behaviour might be correctly described as out of the ordinary in the absence of traumatic experiences, but occurring in response to such an event, it makes little sense to judge this behaviour according to the same expectations as the behaviour of a person not exposed to trauma.

[92] Laura S. Brown, "A Feminist Critique of the Personality Disorders" in Brown and Ballou (eds.), *Personality and Psychopathology: Feminist Reappraisals*, p.220
[93] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, p.33

The behaviour of a person exposed to trauma and a person not exposed to trauma might be hugely different, but might nevertheless be considered equally "ordinary human adaptations" in the light of very different circumstances.

Psychiatric diagnosis of a woman who has been abused, without an adequate (or perhaps any) attempt to understand the complicated nuances of her context, strips her experience of any meaning besides that of individual psychopathology. If this is the vocabulary that is most widely received as that which explains the erratic behaviour and agonising feelings of abused women, then the consequences for them with regards to the potential for her belonging in community are significant. Describing an abused woman's thoughts, feelings, behaviour, and her very person (in the case of a diagnosis of personality disorder) in a language of psychopathology has the effect of bracketing her off from regular people, naming her as "disordered" in comparison to them. It is a language that, in naming her as deviant, declares that she does not belong. The fact that this vocabulary is so influential beyond the boundaries of the psychiatric ward threatens her belonging to any community, including a Christian community.

The House that Power Built:
Looking at the Dynamic in the Literature

> No intervention that takes power away from the survivor can possibly foster her recovery, no matter how much it appears to be in her immediate best interest.
>
> Judith Lewis Herman[94]

In this section, I will look at the relationship between a person who has been sexually abused, and a literature and practice that seeks to "understand" the impact of abuse through diagnosis. I will begin by looking at the power dynamic inherent in the literature on the impact of child sexual abuse, and how this shapes clinical interpretations of this experience. I will then consider the professional re-naming and pathologising of the abuse victim as a reflection of the original experience of abuse. Thirdly, I will present non-compliance with psychiatric diagnosis as an act of resistance to this further abuse.

[94] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, p.133

The power to rename

The first two papers reviewed in the first section of this chapter, in talking about the "reports" made by victims of child sexual abuse, show a lack of awareness with regard to the inevitable professional translation of the impact of abuse. Both papers repeatedly list effects that subjects of these research studies have supposedly "reported". Browne and Finkelhor refer to one study that found "a greater likelihood for subjects with childhood sexual experiences to *report* symptoms of depression"[95], and another "which indicated that sexual abuse victims *reported* that they experienced more depressive symptoms during the 12 months prior to the study than did nonabused subjects."[96] Polusny and Follette's paper contains far too many uses of this same phrasing to be able to list here, but it is enough to look at the abstract, which states,

> Sexually abused subjects *report* higher levels of general psychological distress and higher rates of both major psychological disorders and personality disorders than nonabused subjects. In addition, child sexual abuse survivors *report* higher rates of substance abuse, binge eating, somatization, and suicidal behaviors than nonabused subjects.[97]

It is highly unlikely that these people actually *reported* any of these things. It is difficult to imagine that a "sexually abused subject", when asked about her experiences, would reply that she is experiencing "higher levels of general psychological distress and higher rates of both major psychological disorders and personality disorders", or would give a list of experiences that she herself names as "depressive symptoms". What these papers name as the reports of these women are in fact the authors' translations of those reports into a clinical vocabulary.[98]

---

[95] Browne and Finkelhor, "Impact of Child Sexual Abuse", p.69, italics added.
[96] Browne and Finkelhor, "Impact of Child Sexual Abuse", p.69, italics added.
[97] Polusny and Follette, "Long-term Correlates of Child Sexual Abuse", p.143, italics added.
[98] This practice appears again and again in clinical literature on the impact of childhood sexual abuse: "Patients with a history of CSA in the present study reported greater psychiatric disturbance...They also reported a significantly more severe eating disorder psychopathology" (Carter et al, "The Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse in Anorexia Nervosa", p.264); "Patients reported more pathology than nonpatients...Abused subjects reported more pathology than nonabused subjects" (Nash et al, "Long-Term Sequalae of Childhood Sexual Abuse", p.278). See also Mark F. Yama et al, "Childhood Sexual Abuse and Parental Alcoholism: Interactive Effects in Adult Women", *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 63, no.2 (April 1993), pp.300-305, which speaks about patients reporting "symptoms", rather than realising that "symptoms" is not what the patients report, but rather how the patients' words are interpreted in a context that looks for symptoms.

While it may be inevitable and not surprising that the experiences of people who have been sexually abused would be presented in the professional literature in a language that belongs to those writing this literature, what is problematic is that these authors write without acknowledgement that this is happening. Their clinical interpretations of the experiences of abused people are not identified as their interpretations, but as verbatim reproductions of what these subjects themselves have said, when it is extremely unlikely that this is the case.

The point here is not concerned with whether psychiatric professionals are aware that they are engaged in the interpretation of others' experiences; the point is rather that in these papers the authors give no indication of being aware of any process of interpretation. The lack of perceived need to acknowledge that they are interpreting and translating the experiences of women who have been sexually abused is significant, when these women have already had their voices silenced and effectively erased by a person or persons much more powerful than they were at the time.

Bracken and Thomas address the issue that in psychiatry, academic and clinical writing describes patients in a way that the profession assumes is neutral and factual, but which is in fact a reinterpretation of the patient's own words. They argue that the representation of a patient's words and stories cannot be thought of as neutral. The power and authority enjoyed by a psychiatrist, they argue, means that they cannot write about their patients from a neutral position, but rather the accounts they present of their patients are shaped by "our own desires, expectations and prejudices."[99] Bracken and Thomas state, "The supposedly 'neutral' features of academic and clinical writing in psychiatry, which is stylistically detached and objective, purports to tell the truth, but it hides the identity of a narrator who is telling a story about someone else."[100] In a less sympathetic description of the practice of reinterpretation in psychiatry, they state, "psychiatric narrative in the form of case history seizes the patient's subjectivity, twisting and moulding it for its own purposes."[101] They then express concern about a psychiatrist's presumption that his or her description of another person's experience is correct. They are also concerned about the lack of acknowledgment of the process of translation and interpretation that is occurring, particularly given the fact that the person

[99] Bracken and Thomas, *Postpsychiatry*, p.204
[100] Bracken and Thomas, *Postpsychiatry*, p.201
[101] Bracken and Thomas, *Postpsychiatry*, p.203

whose story is being retold will be "drawn from a marginalized and excluded group"[102], and therefore more vulnerable to having her/his voice silenced and re-narrated.

That the practice of the professional renaming of the experiences of vulnerable people can be observed in the most unlikely of places suggests just how widespread and unacknowledged it is as a process. Judith Lewis Herman gives the example of one of her patients, who she calls Irene, who, she writes, "came into treatment complaining of a post-traumatic syndrome with prominent hyperarousal, intrusive symptoms, and severe constriction."[103] Herman also writes of Sylvia Fraser's *In My Father's House*,

> She reports numerous psychiatric symptoms, which include hysterical seizures and psychogenic amnesia beginning in childhood, anorexia and promiscuity in adolescence, sexual dysfunction, disturbed intimate relationships, depression, and murderous suicidality in adult life.[104]

As was the case with those people whose words were re-interpreted by Browne and Finkelhor, and by Polusny and Follette, Herman's characterisation of Irene's and of Fraser's articulations of their experiences are interpretative, not descriptive, but this is not the impression given by the text. Herman translates these experiences into a clinical language because of her own training and experiences, but to say that Irene or Fraser themselves reported them involves a failure to acknowledge their own voices, replacing them with a professional voice.

Herman, identifying herself as a feminist academic, and setting out with the intention of critiquing power dynamics within psychiatry and the impact of these on psychiatry's treatment of people who have been abused[105], nevertheless presumes the right to rename the experiences of vulnerable people. Just a few pages after her presentation of Irene's and Sylvia Fraser's "reports", Herman writes, "The phenomenon of repeated victimization, indisputably real, calls for great care in interpretation."[106] And yet parts of her own work are written without her showing that she even realises she is interpreting another person's experience, let along taking great care in this interpretation.

Slightly later in her book, when discussing the diagnosing of post-traumatic stress disorder in people who have been subjected to trauma, Herman writes,

---

[102] Bracken and Thomas, *Postpsychiatry*, p.201
[103] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, p.142
[104] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, p.97
[105] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, p.ix
[106] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, p.112

> Knowledge is power. The traumatized person is often relieved simply to learn the true name of her condition. By ascertaining her diagnosis, she begins the process of mastery. No longer imprisoned in the wordlessness of the trauma, she discovers that there is a language for her experience.[107]

The suggestion that psychiatric diagnosis is "knowledge", and that a psychiatric diagnosis is "the true name" is, as argued above, simply impossible to defend. There is little basis on which to argue for the factual truth of psychiatric "knowledge", and Herman herself provides no such basis – simply presenting psychiatric diagnoses as knowledge. But, more than that, it is disturbing that a psychiatrist would consider her own interpretation of a very vulnerable person's situation as being "the true name" for her experiences. In this kind of interaction, the traumatized person is not given "*a* language for her experience"; she is presented with *the* language in which such things are correctly articulated and explained.

Caplan and Cosgrove state that terms such as "mental illness" or "mental disorder" are not terms that correspond to objects that can be clearly identified or argued to be objectively "real", but are constructs. They write, "Constructs are defined by whoever does the defining, and the power to make a definition stick resides usually in groups that have the most social, political, and/or economic power."[108] The sticking power of a psychiatric diagnosis has little, if anything, to do with its basis in fact, and a great deal to do with the power of the voice that declared the diagnosis to be truth within a social context that values and recognizes objective scientific truth, and awards power to those who wield it.

What might this mean for a woman who has been sexually abused, and whose ways of continuing in the aftermath are, in Sarah Reith's words, "expressing hope that there will be healing for the wounds of abuse if only one's truth can be heard"[109]? Literature generated from within psychiatry, which claims that patients' "reported" experiences are psychiatric symptoms and disorders, suggests that psychiatry is not a place in which "one's truth can be heard". It is a place where there is only room for one truth, and that is the one owned and imposed by the psychiatrist.

---

[107] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, p.158
[108] Caplan and Cosgrove, "Is This Really Necessary?", p.xx
[109] Sarah M. Rieth, "Scriptural Reflections on Deafness and Muteness as Embodied in the Healing Journeys of Adult Survivors of Sexual Abuse", *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 3 (Summer 1993), p.46

With regards to the question of the status of belonging for past experiences of childhood sexual abuse, a consequence of the practice of psychiatric diagnosis of abused women's reactions to abuse is that the meaning that her past and continuing story might have is divorced from her own context, and placed within another. Her own experiences cease to belong even to herself, let alone more widely in a Christian, or indeed any, community. Bracken and Thomas write, "The initial words used by the patient, the family and wider social group are given by the language and culture through which these events take shape. As such, they are intrinsically bound up in webs of meaning."[110] To present a patient as "reporting" personality disorders or "psychogenic amnesia" is to extract the patient's story from these webs of meaning, and place it in another – one which was most probably utterly irrelevant to the story in the first place. Johnstone argues that the meaning that the experience of distress has to the individual "is the first and biggest casualty of the biomedical model."[111] The meaning of these experiences is not addressed by a discipline that, through the exercise of a professional power that is seldom questioned, simply names them as an illness to be treated.

Psychiatric diagnosis as abuse

> As the therapist listens, she must constantly remind herself to make no assumptions about either the facts or the meaning of the trauma to the patient. If she fails to ask detailed questions, she risks superimposing her own feelings and her own interpretation onto the patient's story.
>
> Judith Lewis Herman[112]

A second point to make against the practice of renaming a vulnerable person's experience, without her consent and perhaps with her resistance, together with what follows from that renaming, is that this practice is itself abusive. The dynamic inherent in this relationship between psychiatry and its already abused patients replicates that to which the patients have already been subjected, and may have similar results.

A psychiatric diagnosis gives a name to the thoughts, feelings, experiences and behaviour of a person who is living in the aftermath of child sexual abuse. Giving a name to these things is not in itself a harmful thing to do – indeed, the movement from a

[110] Bracken and Thomas, *Postpsychiatry*, p.109
[111] Johnstone, *Users and Abusers of Psychiatry*, p.81
[112] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, p.179

state of silence in the aftermath of abuse towards a state in which it is possible to communicate these experiences by appropriating a language and a location in which to speak that language is, I have argued, important in establishing a place of belonging for sexually abused women. It could be argued that psychiatry provides this – a language with which to articulate the experience of the aftermath of abuse, and a place in which to communicate those experiences using that language. The vocabulary that the discourse of psychiatry provides is one that that allows the impact and significance of childhood sexual abuse to be articulated.

However, it is my contention that the naming and the manner of naming that is carried out by the psychiatric discourse is inappropriate and counterproductive to the task of hearing the voices of women who have been abused. Rebecca Parker (a feminist theologian whose writings about her own experience of childhood sexual abuse will form part of the next chapter) writes that during the stage at which she was most intensively remembering and understanding her experience of sexual abuse, she deliberately focused on her experience away from clinical interpretations of those kinds of experiences. She explains, "I intentionally avoided reading psychological and therapeutic literature about child abuse. I chose to relate to my own experience as a primary text. Secondary texts, I felt, might cloud an already difficult internal perception."[113] It was important to Parker that her understanding of her own experience be her own understanding. It is interesting that in referring to her ensuring that she safeguarded her perception of her experience, it is *only* psychological and therapeutic literature, and not any other, that she explains was necessary to avoid. This implies some feature of this literature that poses a danger not posed by writings from other areas. The question now then is what precisely this danger is.

I have already looked at the presumption of negativity and pathology with which those in contact with psychiatry are regarded, and the exclusively negative names and meanings that are attributed to people by this discourse. I have begun to look at issues of interpretation and translation of the experiences and lives of women who have been sexually abused. I will now look at the often unacknowledged power dynamic inherent between psychiatry and those vulnerable people who it names and treats, arguing that the

[113] Rebecca Ann Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), p203

way that this power dynamic dictates to abused people how they must understand themselves and their experiences, is ignorant, arrogant and abusive.

It is indisputable that in an encounter between mental health professionals and those people with whom they work there is a vast inequality in the distribution of power. One party is decorated with qualifications that carry meaning, respect and weight in that context, and the other is not. One party is paid to be there, and the other is compelled to be there – either legally or emotionally. The encounter takes place in a context in which this imbalance of power can be and has been used to control the more vulnerable party, and to enforce compliance. As Bracken and Thomas reveal,

> [P]sychiatry and the mental health system are founded on inequality, symbolized by the power to detain and to treat. Compulsion and coercion are inescapable facts lurking beneath the surface of all encounters between mental health professionals and service users.[114]

The encounter between psychiatric patient and mental health professional will tend to take place on the territory of the party who already enjoys the lion's share of the power in the encounter. Thus, from the start, the relationship is situated in circumstances in which one side holds far more power than the other. When the more vulnerable party has been subjected to past abuse, the power imbalance in this encounter is more acute. Given this initial setup, the process of imposing psychiatric diagnoses onto women who have been sexually abused can be thought of as an insulting and humiliating act that replicates their former experiences of abuse.

As argued above, when a mental health professional claims that a person who has been abused "reports" things such as "personality disorders", "symptoms of depression", or "major psychological disorders", she/he shows her/himself to be choosing not to acknowledge a process of translation of experience into a clinical language. While a mental health professional may fail to acknowledge that this has happened, the act of translation, coupled with the failure to note the issues it raises, has the potential to constitute abuse of the vulnerable person whose experience is being discussed. By failing to acknowledge this process, the mental health professional denies the relationship, the power differentials, and even just the possibility of differing perspectives between her/himself and the abused person about whom she/he is writing. For Polusny and Follette to write, "Sexually abused subjects report…higher rates of both

[114] Bracken and Thomas, *Postpsychiatry*, p.59

major psychological disorders and personality disorders" is to fail to recognise that in the encounter between mental health professional and "sexually abused subject", there are two perspectives, and there is a relation between those two perspectives.

As a study that makes parallel points in another area, Mary Keller, writing in the context of approaches of religious studies scholars in possession studies, argues that the way that scholars in this field can presume the right to name in their own words the "reality" of experiences and events that occur in contexts that are culturally alien to the scholars, constitutes a devaluation of the people who have had those experiences, naming them as incapable of presenting their own reality. The way that these people understand themselves and their experiences, is, Keller argues, "almost completely bypassed for the sake of the conceptual and categorical forms of classification."[115] The presumption of psychiatry to speak the experiences of women who have been sexually abused, and to name their experience in an alien discourse without noting that it is in fact an alien discourse, can be thought of in a similar way. It involves a devaluing of the person who has been abused, and a rejection of her own articulations of her experiences. Her own articulations are, to borrow Keller's words, "almost completely bypassed" for the sake of the conceptual framework and classifications owned and used by the mental health professional. Even if the abused woman's own articulations have some place in the conversation, the respect and value awarded to them as accurate articulations of experience does not compare to the respect and value awarded to clinical translations of experience.

By presenting the abused woman as speaking with the voice of the mental health professional, the mental health professional forces his/her own perspective into her, erasing her own subjectivity and silencing her voice. What does this do to the abused person who was trying to tell her own story? What happens to her if her story is interrupted, if she is deemed incapable of knowing or owning her own mind or history? Keller discusses how, in the context she is addressing the scholar's methodology constructs a particular type of agency for both the scholar and the possessed body, stating, "The scholar is constructed as an active agent and the agency of the people being

[115] Charles Long, *Significations* (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1986), pp.4-5, cited in Mary Keller, *The Hammer and the Flute: Women, Power and Spirit Possession* (Baltimore, MD; London: John Hopkins University Press, 2005), p.12

studied is violently erased."[116] The voice of the possessed body has then been "doubly lost" – overpowered by the possession agency, and then overpowered by the approach taken by the scholar of possession. Likewise in the diagnosing of the experiences of women who have been sexually abused, the agency of the abused woman is violently erased, and her voice is lost again. That the person who is carrying out this second assassination makes no reference to what is happening indicates that either this second assassin is oblivious to what is taking place, or does not consider it important enough to mention.

Not surprisingly, it has been argued that the practice of psychiatric diagnosis can be experienced as "destructive and controlling" by those on the receiving end of these diagnoses.[117] Herman points out that, in the context of abuse, "The more powerful the perpetrator, the greater is his prerogative to name and define reality, and the more completely his arguments prevail."[118] Her description of this relationship could serve well as a description of a relationship between mental health professionals and abused women whose experiences and personalities they presume to name. As discussed above, Herman presents accurate diagnosis as the psychiatrist's providing a patient with "the true name of her condition."[119] There is no question that diagnosis is interpretation – it is presented simply as knowledge, and, as Herman writes in the same paragraph, "Knowledge is power."[120]

Herman's addressing of the issue of a patient's possible resistance to diagnosis highlights further the power dynamic at work, and a tendency of the mental health professional to deny this dynamic and assume objectivity and accuracy. Looking first at the diagnosis of multiple personality disorder, Herman argues that both the professional and the patient may try to avoid reaching this diagnosis – "the therapist through ignorance or denial, the patient through shame or fear."[121] She goes on to write, "Even after the clinician has arrived at a presumptive diagnosis of multiple personality disorder, it is not at all unusual for the patient to reject the diagnosis."[122] In this encounter, it is assumed without question that in a case of disagreement between clinician and patient,

[116] Mary Keller, *The Hammer and the Flute*, p.12
[117] Bracken and Thomas, *Postpsychiatry*, p.13
[118] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, p.8
[119] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, p.158
[120] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, p.158
[121] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, p.157
[122] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, p.157

the clinician's diagnosis must be correct, and is the truth that is necessary as the basis for framing the process of the patient's recovery. The patient's rejection of such a diagnosis is not regarded as a legitimate challenge, but as the result of "shame or fear". It is assumed that subjecting an already ashamed and afraid person to more shame and fear is part of a process that is overall in her best interests, and apparently she has no right to say no.

Herman then says that some patients diagnosed with post-traumatic disorders also resist this diagnosis, writing, "They may feel stigmatized by any psychiatric diagnosis or wish to deny their condition out of a sense of pride."[123] She sees this sense of stigma as something to be broken down by the therapist, and the patient's pride as an obstacle to be overcome, as it is "prevent[ing] the survivor from accepting the diagnosis and seeking treatment."[124] This outlining of a relationship between patient and professional can be interpreted as a power struggle in which the professional is actively seeking to replace the patient's words and understanding with the terminology imposed by psychiatry. The patient's resistance is understood as a resistance to acknowledging the truth, and is therefore something to be conquered.

Herman claims that a therapist "*facilitates* naming and the use of language", and "*contributes* to constructing a new *interpretation* of the traumatic experience."[125] However, her framing of the diagnostic process as involving a struggle to overcome the patient's resistance to the psychiatrist's language does not sound so much like facilitating meaning or contributing to constructing an interpretation as it does determining those things. She contends that this "new interpretation", which she acknowledges will often be resisted by the patient, "affirms the dignity and value of the survivor."[126] I wonder how many "survivors" feel affirmed and valued by their own perspectives being rejected and replaced with the "truth" spoken by their psychiatrists – a truth according to which they are diseased, disordered, and dysfunctional.

Although Herman makes a valid point in saying that providing a person with a language with which to articulate their experiences marks the traumatised person's

[123] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, p.158
[124] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, p.159
[125] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, p.179, italics added.
[126] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, p.179

release from the prison of "the wordlessness of trauma", the manner in which she sees this happening in a psychiatric discourse simply transports a traumatised person from one prison to another. Yes, she is given a language, but with no option to reject or challenge that language, or offer her own alternatives, she has been taken straight from "the wordlessness of trauma" into the prison of psychiatry, within which her own language, her own understandings, her own interpretations are to be overcome and replaced with "the truth" that psychiatric diagnosis brings.

Earlier in her book, Herman writes, "at the moment of trauma, almost by definition, the individual's point of view counts for nothing."[127] I claim that under her description of the diagnostic process, as well as the wider literature's tendency to replace the voice of the sexually abused person with the voice of the mental health professional, it is also at the moment of psychiatric diagnosis that the individual's point of view counts for nothing. The individual's point of view is valuable to the extent to which it corresponds to that of the professional, just as her point of view in relation to her abuser was only valid to the extent to which it corresponded with his. It is difficult to be a separate person in the moment of sexual abuse, and it is difficult to be a separate person at the moment of assessment and diagnosis, as Bracken and Thomas maintain,

> Many service users find the process of psychiatric assessment painful and sometimes oppressive...for in this form of psychiatry, the patient is always 'the other', is always 'outside', always inferior. To be interviewed by a doctor who is seeking not primarily to understand but instead to classify can be disturbing."[128]

Johnstone cites psychologists J. Williams and G. Watson as making the point that, "contact with unresponsive and unhelpful [professionals] is likely to replicate and perpetuate women's previous experiences of their abuse not being recognised and accepted by others."[129] I opened this section with a quote from Herman's book, calling those who treat traumatised people to take care to realise and avoid the danger of making their own assumptions about the fact or meaning of trauma for the patient, since to do this would be the therapist's "superimposing her own feelings and her own interpretation onto the patient's story."[130] When psychiatry fails to acknowledge the processes of translation and interpretation it inflicts on the experiences of vulnerable people who do

[127] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, p.53
[128] Bracken and Thomas, *Postpsychiatry*, p.123
[129] J. Williams and G. Watson, "Mental health services that empower women: the challenge to clinical psychology", *Clinical Psychology Forum* 64 (1994), pp.11-17, cited in Johnstone, *Users and Abusers of Psychiatry*, p.116
[130] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, p.179

not share the conceptual frameworks and values of psychiatry, it has the potential to be very damaging to a person who (returning again to Sarah Reith's description of self harm), in her "desperate prayer of petition, [is] expressing hope that there will be healing for the wounds of abuse if only one's truth can be heard."[131] Psychiatry becomes a place where one's truth is something to be denied and replaced with what is regarded by its source as *the* truth. The failure to acknowledge each sexually abused woman as owning a perspective and a language separate to that spoken by psychiatrists is devaluing of the voice of abused people. The insistence on seeing these women in negative ways, and on presenting victimized women as the problem in the aftermath of abuse, is insulting to those women. The way that mental health professionals invade and conquer the experiences of abused women, denying them a voice in describing their own realities, is abusive. For an abused woman to recapture dignity and self-worth in relation to the psychiatric discourse, for her to continue in her hope that her own truth can be heard, for her to occupy a positive place of belonging in a community of meaning, her rejection of the psychiatric discourse and her moving beyond it is essential.

Non-compliance as the rejection of abuse

Bracken and Thomas devote a chapter of their book *Postpsychiatry* to looking at the contrasts between the medical narratives on recovery and the narratives individuals may give to their own recovery. Recovery, they write, can be thought of as the process of regaining possession of a property or a right that had been lost or taken away.[132] They ask what it is that has been lost or taken away in psychiatry, and who it was who took it? The answer they provide is, "In psychiatry, that which has been taken away is the right to talk about one's experiences in one's own way. It seems to us that it is this that is being reclaimed and recovered."[133]

The notion of talking about one's experiences "in one's own way" is not unproblematic. It could be criticised for being naïve with regard to the unavoidable influence of a variety of discourses on any person's understandings of her or his own experiences. The way that I propose this phrase could be helpfully understood is that

[131] Sarah M. Rieth, "Scriptural Reflections on Deafness and Muteness as Embodied in the Healing Journeys of Adult Survivors of Sexual Abuse", p.46
[132] Bracken and Thomas, *Postpsychiatry*, p.227
[133] Bracken and Thomas, *Postpsychiatry*, p.227

"the right to talk about one's own experiences in one's own way" could be thought of as the right to talk about one's own experiences in whatever way one chooses.

In my first chapter, I identified as one of the features of the feminist approach to this study the importance of this approach being one chosen by women. The fact that an approach is a conscious choice made by a woman in addressing issues around child sexual abuse is then itself an act of resistance to the silencing effect of the experience of abuse. A woman's own choice regarding speech and allocation of meaning with regards her abusive past also functions in this way. The vocabulary with which she speaks about her experiences could incorporate, either consciously or subconsciously, values and concepts drawn from academic disciplines or social customs that have shaped any particular person's understanding of his or her own experiences. This is not the most important issue. The important issue is that any person, and all the more so in the case of a vulnerable person, should be able to speak about her experiences in the way that she has chosen, as in doing so she maintains ownership of those experiences, and a voice in relation to an experience during which her voice was silenced.

It could be argued that the discourse of psychiatry could have a part to play in a person's speaking about his or her experiences. It could be claimed that it is as good a discourse as any other in shaping the way that a person understands her own experiences. If a psychiatric discourse is capable and willing of proceeding in conversation and not monologue, then perhaps this would be a possibility. However, as I have argued, and as the literature indicates, this is a discourse that prefers to shout down rather than speak with, and as such does not make a constructive conversation partner. It is a discourse that carries the danger of silencing voices of abused women, eliminating their perspectives and insights by accepting those insights only on its own terms, without even acknowledging it is doing so. It is a discourse that threatens to overpower and silence the voices of women who have been abused, seeking to define them only according to the requirements of those who are awarded power within this discourse. As such, it is a discourse that threatens to replicate the absolute exercising of power to which abused women have already been subjected. Non-compliance with this discourse can then be seen as an abused woman's resisting future abuse – rejecting a discourse that threatens to overpower and delete her voice, seeking to define her only according to its own requirements.

Conclusion

As a stage in considering the question of how past experiences of childhood sexual abuse can have the status of belonging in Christian communities, this discussion of the clinical discourse on abuse has been an interruption, but it is an interruption that issues a warning into the two sides of the question that I am exploring.

With regards to the first aspect of this question, which is concerned with meaning – the question of how past experiences of abuse can take on *meanings that belong* in Christian communities – the warning is that if Christian communities rely on clinical interpretations of abuse then these meanings will not be ones that most fully belong in their communities. This applies on two levels. Firstly, and perhaps most obviously, they are expressed in a vocabulary that is not a vocabulary that is central to life in Christian communities, and so experiences of abuse and the impacts of these experiences occupy minimal place in the identities and narratives of those communities or in the Christian story. This is a point I will develop at length in chapter five, when looking at the language that is used in church and in theological publications that discuss issues around child sexual abuse. Secondly, because the meanings attributed by the clinical discourse are overwhelmingly negative, named as deviant, and presented in isolation from the context of the person who is being named, then the meanings are ones that incorporate a lack of belonging. They are meanings that necessarily involve declaring the diagnosed person to be one who is set apart from others; depending on the diagnosis she receives, she may well be said to be "disordered" in her very essence.

With regards to the second aspect of the question, which is concerned with voice – the question of how abused women can be *people who belong* in Christian communities through creating the possibility for their stories to be being spoken alongside others in that community – again the psychiatric discourse, if allowed to influence the ways in which child sexual abuse is interpreted in Christian communities, poses a danger. Again, there are two levels to this side of the question. Firstly, I have argued that the clinical discourse is one that silences the voices of abused women; if their situations and their reactions to abuse are interpreted according to the clinical discourse then their voices and stories as they understand and tell them are lost. As psychiatrists insist on speaking for

and over women who have been abused, these women are prevented from speaking their stories in their own voices alongside the stories of others. They may be forced into a mute state, with the isolation this brings, or they may be forced to define their experiences in the terms of this more powerful discourse that overwhelms their own attempts to speak, with the result that their experiences then take on all the negative and alienating meanings that the psychiatric discourse imposes onto them. Either way, the result is a lack of belonging. Secondly, as I mentioned briefly above and will develop in more depth in chapter five, if the psychiatric discourse is permitted to silence the voices of abused women, then what is being silenced is a prophetic voice that has the potential to occupy a very particular space of belonging in a Christian community – a space in which it may speak in a way that speaks truths that challenge this community and call it to live more authentically its call to condemn oppression and exploitation and to defend justice.

The conclusion to this exploration and critique of the function of the psychiatric discourse in relation to considering how the past experiences of childhood sexual abuse can have the status of belonging in Christian communities, is that this discourse is not one that facilitates belonging, but is one that functions to problematise and prevent belonging. In doing so, it replicates certain dynamics that are inherent in abusive relationships, with similar results of silencing and isolating women who have been abused. As the psychiatric discourse is articulated and practiced, it is inappropriate and abusive, and is to be whole-heartedly and definitively rejected with regards its having any role to play in this study that seeks to explore the positive belonging of sexually abused women in Christian communities.

Chapter Three
Searching for Words in the Silence

The end point of the last chapter was one of rejecting the clinical discourse as being appropriate or helpful in speaking about and understanding the impact of childhood sexual abuse when the aim is one of ensuring a place of belonging in Christian communities for women who have been abused. I argued that this discourse, far from facilitating their belonging, in fact functions in the opposite direction by labelling them as deviant and by silencing their voices, imposing onto them an interpretation of their experiences that does not belong to them and does not belong in any community outside a clinical setting. In this chapter and the one that follows the task is to speak with three autobiographical accounts of childhood sexual abuse. The intention in doing so is to develop ways of speaking about childhood sexual abuse that relate to and sit within locations in which a theological vocabulary is spoken, so that it becomes clearer why these experiences and their implications are of significance in Christian communities.

I begin, in this chapter, by presenting a picture of a state of silence and isolation from which the movement towards speech and belonging begins. I then explore in turn each of the three texts, identifying aspects of them that play prominent parts in the stories they tell, and which can speak particularly fruitfully and pertinently into a theological conversation. The purpose of this chapter then is to present these three texts as locations out of which language can be developed, and in chapter four, I enter into an in-depth reflection on two specific images emerging from these texts.

Living in Silence

In a paper exploring a parallel between the healing of adults who were sexually abused as children, and Jesus' healing of a deaf and mute man in Mark 7:31-37, Sarah M. Reith writes of how childhood sexual abuse forces the victim into a "mute" state, with the acts of abuse, and the familial and social circumstances in which abuse is not mentioned, rendering the victim speechless.[1] Each of the three texts to be discussed in

[1] Sarah M. Rieth, "Scriptural Reflections on Deafness and Muteness as Embodied in the Healing Journeys of Adult Survivors of Sexual Abuse", *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 3 (Summer 1993), pp.39-52

this chapter draws attention to being silenced as part of the experience of sexual abuse and its aftermath, and each touches on the issue of how the response to being silenced is non-verbally embodied and communicated as well as eventually overcome verbally.

One way of putting this across, and one that occurs in two of these accounts, is the stifling of a scream. Both Rebecca Parker and Sylvia Fraser connect this to the way in which the pain that is associated with abuse is driven into the body. In the context of identifying a number of ways in which her body in a sense carried the knowledge of having been abused, Parker singles out one that caused her particular worry, "I couldn't scream. My playmates loved to scream just for the fun of it, then laugh and laugh. They'd tell me to scream. But I couldn't. How did you make your body scream? This inability frightened me."[2] Sylvia Fraser describes how she understands starving and burning her body without feeling pain as a manifestation of a way that she uses her mind to silence a potential scream of pain that is never uttered, "My diet is working well. I'm down to ninety-eight pounds…I can burn my arm with a cigarette and not feel it. I wrap my mind around pain till it smothers in its own scream."[3]

In writing about discussion groups that took place as part of experimental workshops and retreats held as part of the Commission on Women within the United Methodist Church of the US in the 1970s, Nelle Morton recalls that when women began to speak about their experiences, she saw that the women's bodies displayed sensations and gestures that often served as visual manifestations or expressions that replaced or preceded verbal communication of painful stories. During discussions in which women would speak about their own experiences in the church, she notes that aside from the spoken word were the visible gestures that the women gave through their bodies, "Sometimes nothing was more visible than a face drawn and contorted…Once I saw a woman's throat open with a cry so great the cry could not come to sound – as in an old person who dies.[4]" Her description conveys the agony of this 'mute' state, in which a woman's pain manifests itself simply in visible contorting, or a cry that is never brought to voice.

---

[2] Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002)
[3] Sylvia Fraser, *My Father's House: A Memoir of Incest and of Healing* (London: Viagro, 1999), p.101
[4] Nelle Morton, *The Journey is Home* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), p.15

Rieth argues that what she terms "self-mutilating behaviors" are a non-verbal statement that the victim of sexual abuse might make about her past, "she is telling the truth in a mute language, for the purpose of, and in the hope of being heard, believed, and protected."[5] Developing the same idea in more depth, philosopher Janice McLane considers what the act of "self-mutilation" signifies as a method of speech.[6] Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's gestural theory of language, she begins from the position that language is a particular kind of development of our bodily existence, and that the communication of experience is fundamental to human living. With this in mind, she addresses specifically those situations in which "self-mutilation" is part of the aftermath of experiences of physical, psychological and/or sexual abuse of children, and explores this act as an outworking of a person's frustrated or thwarted efforts to verbalise her experiences.

If, for a variety of reasons, part of the experience of abuse is the experience of having one's voice effectively eradicated, this leaves the abused person without the option of verbal communication, without the option to communicate the facts or the phenomenon of abuse to others around her or to herself. McLane asks then, in this circumstance, "what becomes of the impetus to speak?", and she answers,

> It is as if the abuse survivor reaches a point at which she must speak, but at the same moment finds in front of her a rock-hard barrier of silence; a barrier which breaks her heart, her resistance, which seals her silence in blood. What is she to do?[7]

If she must communicate her pain, but cannot, this leaves her frustrated and excluded from an activity that is core and basic to human existence. McLane argues that in this context "self-mutilation" can be understood as a bodily gesture through which this person is beginning to 'speak' her pain,

> What the abuse survivor must do is, through her body, learn to speak again. She must communicate both the fact of being abused and the fact of being silenced…The need to speak builds and moves outward, but meets a barrier of silence. In meeting this boundary, the abuse survivor is forced back upon herself; into a box, as it were, inside of which she must play out and voice the drama of her experience…[W]here experience, silence, and the need for expression are all violent, the rebound can become so strong that this assertion may be 'spoken' by injuring one's own body.[8]

---

[5] Rieth, "Scriptural Reflections on Deafness and Muteness as Embodied in the Healing Journeys of Adult Survivors of Sexual Abuse", p.41

[6] Janice McLane, "The Voice on the Skin: Self-Mutilation and Merleau Ponty's Theory of Language", *Hypatia* 11, no. 4 (1996), pp.107-118

[7] McLane, "The Voice on the Skin", p.110

[8] McLane, "The Voice on the Skin", p.110

The notion of the body's role in communicating through its gestures a story that otherwise would not be heard is expressed by Chilean poet Violetta Parra, who writes,

> I do not weep for the pleasure of weeping
> But in order to have a little peace.
> My tears are like a prayer
> That no one wants to hear...[9]

The situation McLane presents though is one in which, as she puts it, "normal tears no longer have meaning"[10], and the whole body needs to find a way to express its pain. The "self-mutilator", McLane argues, is only able to hope that she or anyone else will understand her pain if her whole body cries – bleeds: "Tears have to come from my/ veins to make any difference."[11] Rieth characterises this as a form of "mute prayer", and argues that it is no lesser a form of prayer than one expressed verbally, expressing as it does a hope for healing and recognition by a community and by God,

> Latent in the mute repetition of the original trauma of abuse there is a desperate prayer of petition, expressing hope that there will be healing for the wounds of abuse if only one's truth can be heard.[12]

Whether the issue is more one of not knowing or having access to the words with which to verbalise and communicate the experience of abuse, or of having the words but not a place or an opportunity to communicate, the consequence is the same; the abused person is stuck living in a silence imposed on her by her circumstances. In characterising "self-mutilation" as "a voice on the skin", McLane puts forward the suggestion that each wound is a "mouth", created to speak when the actual mouth cannot communicate the experiences of abuse.[13] "Self-mutilation" is a particular kind of language, communicating a particular kind of experience – as Reith puts it, "the language of suffering and of coerced silence, the language of degradation and brokenness."[14] The body becomes the tool and location for the communication of pain, when verbalising is not an option.

---

[9] Violeta Parra, *Décimas: Autobiographía en verso*, (Santiago, Chile: Sudamericana, 1988), p145, cited in Ivone Gebara, *Out of the Depths: Women's Experience of Evil and Salvation*, trans. Ann Patrick Ware (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), p.28

[10] McLane, "The Voice on the Skin", p.113

[11] Amy Sharpe, Untitled poem in *The Cutting Edge: A Newsletter for Women Living with Self-inflicted Violence*, 4(2), p4, cited in McLane, "The Voice on the Skin", p.113

[12] Rieth, "Scriptural Reflections on Deafness and Muteness as Embodied in the Healing Journeys of Adult Survivors of Sexual Abuse", p.46

[13] McLane, "The Voice on the Skin", p.115

[14] Rieth, "Scriptural Reflections on Deafness and Muteness as Embodied in the Healing Journeys of Adult Survivors of Sexual Abuse", p.41

Morton's accounts of the group meetings in which women told their own stories includes one story that illustrates a movement from a state of silenced pain, to bodily signified pain, through awkward and faltering speech into a story. She describes one participant, who she says seemed quiet and frightened, and did not speak at all until the final day of their workshop,

> I remember well how one woman started, hesitating and awkward, trying to put the pieces of her life together. Finally she said: 'I hurt…I hurt all over.' She touched herself in various places as if feeling for the hurt before she added, 'but…I don't know where to begin to cry.' She talked on and on. Her story took on fantastic coherence. When she reached a point of most excruciating pain no one moved. No one interrupted. Finally she finished. After a silence, she looked from one woman to another. 'You heard me. You heard me all the way.' Her eyes narrowed. She looked directly at each woman in turn and then said slowly: 'I have a strange feeling you heard me before I started. You heard me to my own story.'[15]

Morton identifies the kind of hearing experienced and practiced by the women in this group as being of a unique kind – a hearing that evokes speech. Being "heard to speech" requires a place of "depth hearing" that occurs, not as a response to a person's spoken story, but as something that goes before it, "The sound reached an ear, an ear that was there before the sound was uttered."[16] What begins as an "incoherent sound and gesture"[17] becomes intelligible in the form of words making up a person's story, and embodied pain is heard into a new speech.

Morton's accounts of the workshops she attended present one way in which women's pain might make the transformation from silenced, then gestured, hurt into a form that can be verbally communicated. The texts in this chapter constitute another way. Moving from silence to speech requires a language to speak, as well as a context in which it is possible to speak it. Written texts, such as those presented in this chapter, offer sources out of which language might be generated so that it is possible to talk about the experience of abuse. Beginning to read these texts without a language to talk about the experience of abuse and the experience of having been abused, the words, images, phrases, ideas, and stories they contain offered a language that I found it was possible to 'borrow' and develop. A development of these words and images, leading to novel and

[15] Morton, *The Journey is Home*, p.127
[16] Morton, *The Journey is Home*, p.17
[17] Morton, *The Journey is Home*, p.17

richer meanings that the experience of child sexual abuse might have for people who have been abused, will be the task of chapter four.

The questions shaping my consolidation of my readings of these texts over the long period of time that the readings took place were concerned with belonging and with meaning. How might experiences of childhood sexual abuse be understood and expressed in a linguistic framework that gives them the status of belonging in a particular location – in the case of this study, the location of Christian communities?

Located outside any linguistic framework with which to describe experiences of abuse, or by which to situate them in relation to other experiences and relationships, these experiences remain disconnected; they are memories of something that took place in another world. Exploring the texts in turn will locate within the contexts of the authors' stories those parts of those stories that (coming from this perspective of searching for a theological language) I found offered the possibility and the foundation for a theologically significant linguistic and conceptual framework within which to place experiences that until reading these texts had belonged nowhere. Adopting, connecting, and developing this piecemeal framework opened up the possibility of connection, speech, and meaning. As Morton explains,

> I had no words. I paused. I stuttered. I could find no word in the English language that could express my emotion. But I had to speak. Old words came out with a different meaning. I *felt* words I could not express, but I was on the way to speaking – or the speaking was speaking me.[18]

Martha Ramsey, Where I Stopped: Remembering an Adolescent Rape

Martha Ramsey's book is written out of her experience of rape at the age of thirteen by a stranger who attacked her at the side of a road. She writes about the rape itself, about the trial of her rapist, at which she was required to testify, and about the decades that followed. She contextualises this narrative within her family setting, and within the social and political environment of the time.

[18] Morton, *The Journey is Home*, pp.128-129

Searching for meaning

The way that Ramsey's book begins introduces immediately questions about meaning. She begins with a detailed description of the dress she was wearing on the day she was raped. She describes in detail what the dress looked like, how her mother had made it according to her specific requests, and how she felt wearing it. Within a description that covers two pages, she writes,

> The day it happened I was wearing a red dress…This perfect dress, maybe the best dress I'd ever had…The dress was sexy. When riding my bicycle I let my skirt hang over the back of the seat…I hoped someone would see me fly by, slender and desirable. They would be overcome by awe…Wearing this new dress I could go anywhere…It was the red flag of my independence…There was no way it could be wrong.[19]

The narrative then shifts to her thoughts after the rape, "I was never sure if what happened had meant anything at all. The red dress, the rape – I outgrew them both…My clothes became pieces of evidence, tagged and stored in a closet in the county courthouse."[20]

The opening chapter concludes with her identifying her purpose in writing the book as a project in discovering what the rape had meant for her. The images that she experiments with alternate between extremes; it is seen as an event with no meaning, or an event with great meaning, or an event that in fact never actually took place at all. This alternating between how much, if any, meaning the rape has, even before thinking about what that meaning could be, suggests that until the point of writing the book, the meaning of the rape and its place in her life were not yet known to her,

> Surely I had come through it very well, undamaged. It was as if it were really nothing.
> Or perhaps it was a great deal: a whale I thought I might have seen for a moment, that might really be lolling, huge and mysterious, under the surface of the blank waters.
> Or it might just be a figment of my imagination, floating in the sea of my imaginary life.
> At thirty-four, I set out to learn what rape had meant.[21]

Remembering back to her feelings on waking up the morning after the rape, Ramsey suggests a demolition of meaning. She recalls looking out of her bedroom

[19] Martha Ramsey, *Where I Stopped: Remembering an Adolescent Rape* (San Diego; New York; London: Harvest, 1995), pp.1-2
[20] p.2
[21] p.3

window to see the familiar row of treetops that she looked at every morning, and whose "outlines had been old friends."[22] On this morning, however, "they hung in the sky without meaning."[23] In perceiving a termination of their meaning as "old friends", her narrative also suggests a shift in her perception of the world around her, such that it now appears to her to be more hostile and dangerous. As the result of this one experience, she is forcefully relocated in a world that she now knows is not friendly or safe, though she feels the need to maintain the appearance of continuing to believe that it is. She writes, "Not only could the world of adults not protect me…I had to pretend that I thought all their efforts were working and that I felt safe. I had to pretend to be more innocent than I felt."[24]

Such is the intensity of the experience of her rape that everything now appears different to her, seen through a "transparent glassy membrane"[25] which changes how she perceives and interprets objects and people around her – "*my* trees, *my* grass, *my* roads"[26] are now part of this new strange world. The power that the rapist has exercised is absolute – the power to transform the meaning of her world, implanting in her mind a new meaning of the world as unpredictable and frightening, and determining how she will perceive and relate to this world, "the terror and shock had opened a raw place in my mind where anything could lodge. In that moment I gave him complete authority over my mind and my imagination."[27]

In comments that she makes about her thoughts about the rape both during and in the years afterwards, it is clear that the question of meaning was for a long time unasked and perhaps in a sense irrelevant to her more immediate concerns. As her attacker was about to rape her, Ramsey recalls thinking, "Strangely, it didn't matter. Afterward, he would kill me. I thought only of that."[28] In the moment, any thoughts as to the implications of being raped were irrelevant, with her only concern being whether she would survive. The rape was something that she went along with because there was no other option, "I met him as one would meet a vaguely foreknown destiny; without

[22] p.48
[23] p.48
[24] p.56
[25] p.48
[26] p.48
[27] p.76
[28] p.25

complaint, with the resignation of children. Understanding that I could do nothing against him, I did as he told me with a kind of rueful sadness."[29]

In the absence of any sense of anger or indignation on her own part, she remembers feeling baffled when she encountered these sorts of reactions from adults around her. One that she tells is of a teacher who approached her shortly after the rape, with both concern and outrage at what had happened. Ramsey's only response was confusion, finding it odd that someone thought that concern was necessary, and that it would be regarded as something to feel angry about. However, despite her confusion, these reactions did serve as a clue to her as to the wrongness of what had happened. Of the conversation with the teacher, she writes, "I remembered her outburst...Through the years of trying to forget about the rape, this memory subtly reminded me that my hurt had been serious."[30] In a similar way, when years later, as part of her research for the book, she conducted interviews with a number of the jurors who sat on her trial, she reflects on their perceptions of the wrongness of the crime. She contrasts this with her own perceptions of the fact of having been raped, realising that it had never occurred to her to be outraged or morally disgusted by what had happened, "To them it had been monstrous, inconceivable, deserving of the most severe punishment. To me, though, it had always been something that had actually happened, not something that never should or, one told oneself, never would happen."[31]

Part of her learning what the rape had meant is simply her learning that it was something that should not have happened, which she starts to see when she begins to realise that the perceptions of these adults were appropriate, and an indication of how she should perhaps be understanding the fact of having been raped, "Their perception of the wrongness of the act had been clearer than mine…I began to see my thirteen-year-old self with their eyes – innocent, young, and badly hurt."[32] She experiences this

[29] p.346
[30] pp.79-80
[31] p.300
[32] p.300. Although part of the movement in the book is of her shifting from not being able to perceive the rape as an act of terrible wrong doing towards appropriating this view and experiencing a sense of outrage that she observed in the adults around her, Ramsey's wondering about the contrast between what the rape had meant to her and what it had meant to those adults around her does prompt the reader to consider the purpose of asking questions about meaning. While she characterises as positive the movement from acceptance of the rape as just something that happened to something that should not happen, it could be that attaching this meaning to the rape at the time would have served no purpose for her, when her energies were concentrated on more immediately important matters of surviving the attack itself, the trial, and then trying to continue with a 'normal' life.

'awakening' to the severity of her hurt, and the anger that accompanied this particular attribution of meaning to her experience in terms of a renewal and new life, "In this rage is my resurrection."[33]

Occupied by darkness

Ramsey's description of the rape itself is rich in metaphors and images that she uses to describe how the attack was experienced at the time, and which she continues to use throughout the book, connecting her feelings in the years afterwards to those that she had as the rape was happening. She remembers how she felt as the rapist was leading her to a location he had prepared, using a succession of metaphors to convey the experience she had at this time of feeling detached from her body,

> My body was acting slow, clumsy, far away, as if I were no longer located in it. Fright had made me a frozen animal, slowed everything in me to near paralysis. I had turned into something brittle and transparent like glass. I had no solidity, no color. Yet my body, so far away, could still be felt, shaky, as if the glass could tremble like gelatin.[34]

The adjectives used in this excerpt – frozen, brittle, transparent, shaky, trembling – emphasise her acute awareness of her vulnerability. As well as this, her speaking of feeling like an animal, and like glass or gelatin, presents her as something other than a person – as an animal or object that is motionless or about to break.

This sense of her body being far away, and of feeling less and less like the person she had been beforehand, increases as she is raped, "I had grown more numb and gelatinlike, my voice and mind more distant."[35] Thinking back to what she remembers, Ramsey realises that she does not remember those features of her experience that it might be expected a person would usually remember, "I don't remember feeling him lying on my body. I don't remember his smell or the feel of his skin or his breath on me. I remember only this disembodied piercing."[36] Her memory of what the rape felt like seems to overwhelm any memories of the external details.

[33] p.196
[34] p.25
[35] p.28
[36] p.27

Ramsey writes of how, immediately after the rape, she developed a fear that the rape had had the result of the rapist's being physically present inside her. Remembering the visit to the hospital on the afternoon of the rape, and the discussions around the possibility of pregnancy, she writes,

> The doctor, the nurse, my mother, my father – they all knew and believed that I could be pregnant. This man had spat something into my body that could take root there and grow. They could not draw it out of my body. It was too late.
> I could not be cleansed. The rape was not now only a memory but an actual presence. I held *him* in my belly.[37]

When trying to articulate how she felt the morning following the rape, she remembers thinking to herself, "Something had ridden over me, finished with me, and left a haunting."[38]

This vague sense of being "haunted" by the rape is an image that she develops later in the book, when she is looking back on her experiences decades later. Here, Ramsey uses the metaphor of having been "rent by a splinter"[39] to describe the memory of the rape – both the physical act of rape on a thirteen-year-old, and the feeling that continued long afterwards that there was something remaining inside her that was a lasting presence of the rape. The presence of this "splinter" is felt as physically painful and invasive, occupying space inside her and hurting her in the process,

> [the splinter] became fixed within me, sticking up into me with its point in my heart. Stiff, taking up a lot of room, aching, and working its way in further in response to certain experiences and actions of my own… A splinter made of pain, disgust, and a sense of being able to see no light in the morning, and no joy in the gift of life. [40]

However, at the same time, this splinter is also felt as an absence, "a hardness dwelling inside me, and within that hardness a nothingness."[41] While she continues to sense the invasive physical presence of something that was deposited inside her as a result of the rape, the content of this "splinter" is felt as a void – a paradoxical feeling of being filled up by emptiness.

Moving through the section of the book that she names "Recognition", Ramsey turns to look at and describe in more detail the emptiness that this splinter contains, "Inside me there is a yearning, a terrible sadness…I am sinking down into a very dark

[37] p.34, italics in original.
[38] p.35
[39] p.197
[40] pp.197-198
[41] p.198

place. Inside me is now a realm of darkness, of horror and no-hope."[42] An aspect of this darkness that was keenly felt in the immediate aftermath of the rape was her sense of separation from everyone around her who from her point of view had no idea what it was like to be in a place of "horror and no-hope".

> I asked myself, *What happened to the darkness?*
> I forgot it.
> Yet I did not really forget it.
> And because my mother, my father, the detectives, my teachers, and my schoolmates did not know how it had been in this darkness, because I was alone, and because I was left there by everyone around me, who looked at me and decided that I was fine.
> What dried up in me was love.[43]

Silence and isolation

The darkness that Ramsey talks about is closely connected to one of the other aspects of the rape and her adolescent and adult life afterwards – that of silence. When she first addresses the experience of silence during and after the rape, she associates it with the darkness that fell over her,

> When did the silence begin? It began when the rape began, on the road, and in the clearing…
> The silence grew deeper, became an abyss, a void; and grew shallower – hearts rattled, breaths quickened into gasps.
> When he raped me it was done in silence. Maybe the trees turned away, unwilling witnesses, and in a dark metamorphosis bowed down into a hedge of wild horror. Maybe there was a roaring in my ears of darkness. I think there was. In the clearing darkness fell, a terrible eclipse lasting twenty minutes.[44]

As with Ramsey's paradoxical description of the splinter that she was aware of inside her, her description of silence is at the same time an absence of sound – "an abyss, a void" – as well as an explosion of noise – "a roaring". In this same passage in which she discusses in detail what this silence felt like, she writes, "The shock of having been raped was a loud, dreadful stillness in my ears."[45] Silence, far from being peaceful, is characterised as a kind of violence, beginning as the rapist approached, and far too present in every aspect of the rape itself. This initial descent of silence at the point of the rape is identified by Ramsey as the aspect of her experience of rape that prevailed long

[42] p.193
[43] p.194
[44] p.107
[45] p.108

afterwards, in the failure of those around her to acknowledge what had happened. "Did this silence ever 'wear off'? I say no, I say it simply faded into and was transformed into other silences."[46] In this way, she perceived the silence that followed her attack as a twenty year long extension of this aspect of the rape itself, and she identifies it as the part of her experience that proved the most painful and dangerous, "The greatest harm to me lay in the silence that hung in all these experiences, the silence fed by the inability of those around me to speak in any intimate way about the rape."[47]

In wondering about the cause of this prolonged silence that followed the rape, Ramsey is aware of two factors feeding into its continuation. She writes,

> How could I talk about the end of everything, after which, strangely, nothing seemed to have ended at all? What kind of intimacy, or language, would have made it possible to share such a thing?
> No one knew me that well.[48]

The problem is doubly one of language and one of relationship; on the one hand, she could not find the words to talk about the impact and meaning of her experience, and on the other hand, there was no one who could hear it. Such a conversation requires an intimacy of relationship that simply did not exist.

The silence associated with the rape, and with the fact of having been raped forces a separation between her and those around her. She realises that having been raped makes her "the possessor of an experience that others do not want to know about."[49] She does acknowledge that their not wanting to know is understandable – why would anyone want to recognise that the world is far more malevolent and dangerous than they had admitted previously? But the consequence of this lack of recognition and lack of conversation results in a separation and isolation so severe that she characterises it in terms of her living in a separate world, in which she is stuck, not knowing how to live as the wholly different person that the rape has turned her into,

> Others do not want to live in a world in which these things happen, the world in which you must now live. They hang back at the gates with a natural, an almost animal, shrinking. You understand perfectly well their shrinking, for you are also like them. But you do not know how to be what you are now.[50]

---

[46] p.108
[47] p.109
[48] p.83
[49] p.109
[50] pp.109-110

Writing about the weeks and months immediately after the rape, during which she did in fact have to talk about the rape a great deal as part of the preparation for testifying at the rapist's trial, she remembers being surrounded by people who were concerned about her and concerned about doing what was right for her, and yet in her interactions with them she experienced them as two-dimensional, "Everyone is concerned, but in a fixed pose. They seem to stand together but they are not really alive, nor are they meeting each other and sharing in each other's pain. Instead they stand silent, as pictures do."[51] The reactions of those around her sit in parallel with her description of the silence of her physical surroundings after the rape. She remembers the appearance of the grass that she had been lying on, writing, "The silent grass, my familiar grass, was shocked, stunned, and at the same time completely unaware. It received my blood like a blank page receiving the printing of a word, impartial and absorbent…The blood fell into silence."[52] This image of the grass as "shocked, stunned…completely unaware" could well be a fair description of the reactions of the people around her. In dealing with the practicalities of taking her to the hospital, arranging the trial, rehearsing her testimony, the adults around her recognise that a great harm has been done. They do not deny or reject this, but as with the grass which receives her blood in an impartial way, her hurt is absorbed in this stunned silence, without real recognition, so that in these reactions, again, "The blood fell into silence."

Living alone in a world in which rape is a reality, a world in which it seems to her no one around her wants to live with her, she found that once she entered college, she turned to reading rape narratives in the ancient classics,

> It was a literature in which rape figured largely. Europa, Leda, Daphne, the Sabine woman – many nymphs, maidens, wives, and even female animals had been raped by gods or men…In the myths the raped ones never spoke, except when they begged the gods to deliver them somehow. They were simply hurt, or they turned into something else – sometimes both. I recognized the way these girls had small parts in their own stories.
> What had it been like for *them*? The myths were strangely silent on this. No narrator or character ever expressed horror or outrage at these rapes. They were simply part of the way of things. In this mythic world females were overpowered because they could be overpowered: it was that simple. This absence of useful insight disappointed me. But at least it was not a world in which no mention was made of rape at all.[53]

[51] p.109
[52] pp.107-108
[53] p.144

Revisiting her own experiences in the light of these stories of rape was the first way she found of feeling connected. Situating her own experiences within this larger narrative in which rape is acknowledged as something that happens and causes pain, she does not have to live entirely in a world that she inhabits on her own. That the only others inhabiting her world with her are these mythical creatures again emphasises the power of the rapist to transform the nature of her relationships with those around her, as well as the impact of the silent and silencing environment in which she lives.

Restoration and healing

> It's in my nature, full of fantasies and a stubborn belief in happy endings, to want to make and see a happy ending…Now it's important that I say instead: the story does not ever really end. There is no 'fine.'[54]

One of the shifts of thought and understanding that occurs as Ramsey moves through writing her book is the development and modifying of her understanding of her own healing. Initially, her yearning to be healed was a yearning to be restored to her previous state, before the rape happened. She understood healing in terms of restoration – as having returned to her something she perceived as having been taken away by the rape,

> In a fairy tale a girl's feet are cut off by a giant, but at the end of the story after her many trials the fairies put them back on and she is as before. I brought this yearning to the rape, this wish and hope that I could be wholly restored by magic power.[55]

Realising that this magical restoration did not seem to be happening, she managed to convince herself that it was somehow happening in a way that was unknown to her – "I decided that I was being restored by a power that operated in ways I couldn't see or know" – and so she decided just to go on with everyday life as if nothing had happened. This same denial, she observed, was evident in the adults around her who, not knowing what to do or how to help, maintained the same pretence as her,

> With this pretending no one disagreed. No one dared disagree. If they dared to suggest otherwise, it might not happen. They, the adults, believed in the same magic… I went on wordlessly affirming to myself that I would be, somehow, magically healed.[56]

[54] p.350
[55] p.93
[56] pp.93-94

Ramsey connects her initial assumption that the healing would have to be carried out by some magical power to the fact that she sensed immediately that the loss of her virginity was the loss of something she felt to be sacred, so that only "A fairy godmother, or some such being…could make the sacredness of my virginity – the integrity of myself – be not finally gone."[57] The fact that she knew the hurt to have been sexual, and that this was equated with the loss of something sacred, resulted in her thirteen-year-old self assuming that the healing would have to be magical. As she became older, the same knowledge led to a different assumption. As a child she had thought, "Who, anyway, could have promised me that, having lost what I had lost, I could be sexually healed? Only a fairy."[58] As an older teenager, she allocated this task of healing to a succession of men with whom she had sexual relationships, "The hidden truth about me in college was that I knew only one powerful, genuine desire – to be loved, saved, and repaired – and the agent of it would be a man."[59]

Between her childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood, there is a shift in the terms she uses to describe this imagined healing, as she develops her understanding of healing from a more childlike understanding of healing as a reversing magic spell, to speaking about it in terms of salvation and redemption. Of one potential "healer", she writes, "I thought he was my redeemer, the bringer of light and hope to my dark and hurting condition."[60] She corresponds the power that these potential healers have in her expectations of them with the power of the rapist, in realising years later that the two men with whom she became the most deeply emotionally involved were both evocative of the rapist.[61]

Although her language shifts from the magical to the redemptive, her hope remains similar. Continuing as she did to understand the healing that she expected to receive in terms of restoration, or an undoing of the rape, her own word she uses to summarise what she was hoping for from this redeemer-partner is "unrape."[62] She comes to understand later that as long as she expected someone to reverse the rape, the agent of

[57] p.93
[58] p.94
[59] p.141
[60] p.147
[61] p.147
[62] p.141

this redemption was necessarily someone she could imagine as the rapist, so that the healing would seem to relate to the hurt,

> I invested in him my still urgent hope of finding repair…I imagined that this man, because he evoked the rapist, would be able to reverse the happening of rape, by a kind of double negative. To black out a terrible blackness with a good blackness. To bring me into a darkness where I could live.[63]

The man who would release her from the prison of her body[64] needed to be a man who would be able to walk along the same path that had imprisoned her in the first place.

In the later parts of the book though, Ramsey's understanding of the nature of healing becomes very different. This change of understanding begins to happen fifteen years after the rape, when she is attending meetings for people from alcoholic families. She remembers these meetings as the first place that she began to feel a genuine connection with the world around her,

> In the meetings I began to feel empathy for the first time, in barely known, veiled, and passing moments, and my inner sense of my relationship with the world began to evolve. Instead of feeling *Nobody knows how I'm hurting*, it became *We're all in this together*.[65]

It is in these terms of connection and relationship that she begins to understand her own healing.

She begins then to move away from an understanding of healing as restoration or repair, rejecting the idea that healing, understood as an undoing or a cure, is possible or appropriate. Realising that a large part of the impact of the rape was the separation that it produced between her and others – "Neither the person closest to me nor the trees and sea I loved had felt real or had touched me for a long time"[66] – recovering a sense of loving connection becomes a 'healing' relationship that replaces her previous desire for a 'rape-reversal' or magical restoration. A poem that she wrote at the same time that she was attending these meetings concludes with her thinking back to one aspect of her experience of rape,

> Grown-ups did not see the secret arms
> that reached around me out of the earth,
> which continually nurses the grass
> like a mother. As I lay down for him
> earth nursed me against its flat body
> knobby with tiny stones and roots of grass.

[63] pp.163-164
[64] p.141
[65] pp.173-174
[66] p.234

> As he slit me, earth twined around me
> such a binding love
> I was not destroyed
> and years of healing began on the same day.[67]

The fact that during the rape she did maintain some connection with the world, and did sense a loving presence, is presented as a signal of the beginning of healing.

Towards the end of the book, Ramsey relates with sadness a conversation she had with her sister, Alida, about her memories of the time of the rape. Her sister, two years younger, remembers having felt angry at the time because she was shut out of what was happening in their household, assumed to be too young to be involved. When asked what she would have wanted to do, Alida replies simply, "I wanted to hold your hand, or something."[68] While the adults around her were arranging the trial, promoting community safety, and keeping an awkward presence alongside her, the person who could have maintained a healing relationship at this time was kept away from her,

> Alida, my playmate, who laughed with me over our Barbie dolls, had known exactly what to do. After talking with her I felt a great sadness. Not only had my parents' fear kept them apart from me, it had made them act to keep her apart from me. And she was the one person who might have been able to help me feel less alone.[69]

In one of her imaginings about healing, she had wondered, "What if there were some healer, an older woman who could embrace the hurt one and somehow affirm to her that even then, while in the infernal dark, she was accompanied, that she could be healed?"[70] It turns out that this was in fact a role that could have been taken by a child, who had sensed, when the adults had not, the right thing to do.

The conclusion of Ramsey's book is the rejection of healing as a "happy ending", and its reframing as an honest recognition of hurt, and of loving presence in the middle of this hurt,

> I am no longer ashamed of my longing to be loved and held. I can talk to her about it whenever she wants to. What grew in the grass and trees around her…what made her sister angry, what brought her the words with which she found herself was love, and this is real.[71]

---

[67] p.176
[68] p.263
[69] p.263
[70] p.197
[71] p.352

Rebecca Parker, "The Unblessed Child"

Rebecca Parker is president and professor of theology at the Unitarian Universalist seminary Starr King School for the Ministry at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. She is an ordained United Methodist minister in dual fellowship with the Unitarian Universalist Association. Parker's account of the sexual abuse she suffered as a young child, carried out by a neighbour, is told in the context of a book co-authored with Rita Nakashima Brock in which the authors draw on their own experiences to explore what they see as the sanctioning of violence and redemptive suffering within Christian theology and practice. The title of the book, *Proverbs of Ashes*, refers to Job 13:12, in which Job rails against his friends' delivery of pious statements in the face of suffering, "Your maxims are proverbs of ashes." As well as questioning the role of Christian theology in the perpetration of violence and abuse, the authors set out with the intention of putting forward a theology that does not sanction violence, or exacerbate the pain felt by victims of abuse, but which is authentic, healing, and challenging,

> What words tell the truth? What balms heal? What proverbs kindle the fires of passion and joy? What spirituality stirs the hunger for justice?...What are the ways of being with one another that enable life to flourish, rich with meaning?...We ask these questions not to arrive at final answers, but because asking them is fundamental to living.[72]

Parker's story of remembering her abuse and realising the impact it had is told in a chapter she titles "The Unblessed Child", which is the name Parker gave to a poem she wrote during the process of remembering what had happened to her. She had drawn a pastel drawing of how she remembered herself as a child,

> The child's face was round. Her cheeks were red with shame. Her throat was covered with sharp red, yellow and blue lines of pain, extending down to her heart. Her big eyes were frozen wide open. Behind her, there was a forest of evergreen trees, like those that grew beyond our town of Hoquiam. Above the trees a great, silver moon rose – a canopy of protection.[73]

The child in the drawing, she named "The Unblessed Child", writing,

> Her eyes see all the way into his
> with a rage that will not let go
> or turn into sorrow.
> She is not blessed.
> She is going to fight him

[72] Brock and Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes*, p.8
[73] p.75

for a long time.[74]

Silence, sacrifice and the destruction of relationship

From the beginning, Rebecca Parker's experience of abuse is presented as one that she carried around in secret, partly owing to the abuser's issuing a series of threats to ensure she would not tell anyone what was happening,

> When I was three, four, and five the neighbor who lived around the corner from us had groomed me to trust him. Then he had molested me, orally raping me repeatedly. The anxiety, fear, and pain of that experience and the fierce bond I'd formed with the abuser were traumas I could not and did not tell. He terrified me with threats that silenced me.[75]

Telling her that a good child would not tell anyone about the abuse, and then telling her that she would be taken away from her family and put in jail if she told, her abuser succeeded in frightening her into silence.

Parker also attributes her silence about the abuse to a mentality that she grew up with regarding suffering, according to which personal pain was regarded as something to be borne quietly rather than shared with anyone else. She writes,

> When I was in distress, I did not turn to my family or my church. In both places, I had learned that personal need had no place. The good person cares for others, but if she herself is hurt, frightened, confused, or in need, these weaknesses are to be nursed in private, covered over, or solved without bothering anyone else. [76]

She attributes this expectation that she felt to bear her suffering silently partly to the theological teachings she had absorbed, according to which an individual's suffering was perceived as a sharing in the suffering of Christ. Referring to numerous conversations with parishioners, colleagues and friends, Parker presents a pattern of people (in particular women) internalising a theology that teaches that suffering has a redemptive value. Keeping the abuse a secret, bearing suffering silently was, she argues, the natural outworking of the theology she had been brought up with, "I didn't want my suffering to be imposed on anyone else in a way that injured them. I bore it in silence…It was a Christ-like thing to do. Completely unselfish."[77]

[74] p.175
[75] p.23
[76] p.23
[77] p.189

Silenced both by the abuser and by her surroundings, after moving away from the neighbourhood at the age of five, Parker forgot about the abuse. While in hindsight she can see the impact of abuse on her life growing up and into adulthood, at the time she was wholly unaware that the abuse had happened.

Parker sees the abuse, and the silence that surrounded it, as having impacted her relationships with people around her, creating a rift between herself and her family in particular. She grew up in a loving family, but the secret she had to keep from them create a division, "The experience with Frank separated me from all this. I couldn't tell them what was happening to me. I couldn't express my distress and fear. I couldn't explain my rage. I couldn't ask for help."[78] Parker realises then that the impact of the abuse was not just its impact on her, but on her whole family and their relationships with each other,

> I began to think that Frank's abuse had done something not just to me, but to our whole family, to my brother Ted, and to all our relationships with each other. The parsonage in Hoquiam was where I fled to when I left Frank's house, but it was not a home in which the truth of my experience could be told or where I could find help.[79]

She began experiencing herself as two different children – one for her family's house, and one for her abuser's house – with the result that she never felt that she belonged anywhere,

> At the parsonage, I was The Blessed Child who had good parents…At Frank's house I was The Unblessed Child, stimulated by desires and wants, manipulated for his gratification, pleasured and pained. My inner self was severed in two. Nowhere was really home.[80]

<u>Bonding with the abuser</u>

The destruction of Parker's relationship with her family contrasts in her narrative to the intensity of the relationship that was formed with her abuser. She tells of how he would ensure that she returned to his house by promising her a toy he was making for her, but which was not quite finished. However, she realises that the reason for her return to his house was not just that she wanted the toy he was promising her, but that something about the abuse had resulted in an intense relationship that meant she did not

[78] p.188
[79] pp.186-187
[80] pp.191-192

want to be apart from him, "Something in me responded to the emotional intensity and the attention. I became deeply attached to Frank and didn't want to be separated from him."[81] She recalls that after her family moved away from the neighbourhood where her abuser lived, she was furious about this relationship having been severed, "I used to stand in the corner between the two doors and slam them, first one, then the other. I'd slam them as hard as I could. Hard enough to make the house shake. And I'd be crying and shouting. I was furious…I didn't want to be separated from Frank…I was very upset at being taken away from him."[82]

As she starts to try to remember the abuse, and to understand the nature of her relationship with the abuser, she reaches the point of feeling that she is a reflection of the abuser, and that he is somehow dwelling inside her body. At the bottom of a drawing that she had made of the abuser's face, she writes his name, Frank, but writes it backwards. Wondering about why she had done this, she writes, "My own face, I felt, was the mirror image of Frank's face somehow"[83]

> I am the mirror
> Through which Frank becomes visible
> I stake his head into the accusation:
> *This is your name.*
> He breaks through green life
> Cutting the tender shoot, new born.
> He is not a gardener.
> His sickle is old.
> It stops the harvest.
> Has my body given birth to anything
> Except what he planted as a crime?[84]

The connection she felt with him was so intense that she could no longer distinguish between herself and her abuser, "It was no longer clear to me whether I was fighting Frank or fighting myself. The abuser was inside me."[85]

Within the context of exploring her feeling that the abuser was somehow inside her body, Parker remembers a dream that she had during this period, in which she was trying, but failing, to extract from her body the presence of something stuck there, causing her pain,

---

[81] p.190
[82] p.171
[83] p.175
[84] pp.174-175
[85] p.203

> I am bent over, sobbing. My hands pull against my face in anguish. There is something gagging in my mouth. I reach into my throat and grab hold of something round and slippery and begin to pull. It is the end of a thick, slick, white gelatinous cord…I want to get it out of my throat. I pull and pull. It slides out, one foot, two feet, three feet. I keep pulling. It is a massive coil of stuff inside me. I keep pulling. Soon there is a whole pile outside my body. I keep yanking and pulling, and then it jerks to a stop. It is stuck. I tug and the slippery, thick cord breaks somewhere down inside my body. The broken end springs free and spills out of my mouth. I am filled with despair and dread. There is more inside me, and I can't reach it now.[86]

Carrying around inside herself something that "he planted as a crime", the bond with her abuser was impossible to break.

She later names the bond between herself and her abuser as one of compassion, but a horribly warped compassion. She realises that in looking at her abuser's face, what she saw was a man who desperately needed to deposit his own terror onto, or into, someone else. Her response to seeing his terror and his need was one of compassion, which then connected her to him in such a way that she could not, and did not want to, sever this bond. If she did, he would be again left alone with his terror.

> I can see what he wants from me. He wants my terror. He wants me to be terrified. It is my abject terror he wants to possess and control. Then I remember the worst thing that happened. In those moments, face to face with his desire for me to be terrified, I looked at his face and I saw a man in cruel, anguished, need.
>
> *I see his face. It is full of pain. I feel as if he is trying to get back his own face. As if, by forcing my face to wear the face of terror, I will be the mirror in which he will be restored to himself. He isn't looking at me. He is looking through me. He is looking at himself. In the presence of such pain, my heart awakes in compassion.*
>
> That was the intensity of the bond. The glue was compassion. I couldn't turn away from this face holding mine in terror without turning away from the compassion I felt. I let the gaze hold. I let myself be locked into another's need for release from pain.[87]

Eventually she reaches a point at which she sees that this bond is so intense that it has impacted on her ability to believe in any other relationship, explaining that when she imagined herself in a non-abusive relationship with anyone around her, she simply could not believe that this could ever be possible, "I had to face that at the core of my being I did not believe such mercy or such freedom existed. I only *really believed* in Frank."[88]

---

[86] pp.204-205
[87] pp.196-197, italics in original.
[88] p.196, italics in original.

Believing only in the existence of the abuser, the relationship with him eclipsed and replaced all others. It is the abuser who had defined who she was, who had filled her with his presence, and whose will she obeyed. She comes to name this relationship as idolatry, realising that in all these ways the abuser had come to replace God,

> This was the force of the abuser in my life. He occupied the place of God. It was his presence, his will, his actions that ruled my life. I had no other god before him. My spirit bowed down to him. I accepted that I was who he said I was. His spirit filled my life. I began to think of my struggle as a struggle with idolatry. The relationship I had with Frank was an unholy alliance, a bond that still hadn't been broken. The obeisance I rendered to him was unholy worship.[89]

She finds herself locked in this all-encompassing relationship with her abuser, knowing it to be horribly wrong, and experiencing it as terrifying, but not knowing how it could be any different, "I felt split, possessed, haunted, captive to a fear that I couldn't exorcize by calling its name."[90]

Healing as connection and presence

Parker remembers that as a young child, leaving the abuser's house, she had a ritual that she would perform each time that in her mind undid the acts of abuse, allowing her to return home in the same state as before,

> Leaving Frank's house, physically in pain and emotionally overwhelmed, I'd run to my tricycle out on the lawn…I'd climb on the tricycle and ride as fast as I could…I'd pedal with all my might, round and round, furiously until the trike was bumping and sailing over the sidewalk and a breakneck speed. I'd cycle all the way around the block, once, twice, three times. I'd feel the rush of the wind and exertion of my body, the jolts of the uneven sidewalk. I would make it go away. It didn't happen. It wasn't real. I felt the power in my body, the energy of riding as fast as I could. This circling had power. It was magic. It made Frank's hands on my body disappear. It purged the shame and fear. It erased the events, I was sure.[91]

The process operated on a magical power that she was capable of producing, which reversed the abuse and its effects on her so that it simply had not happened and she could be as before.

Another ritual that she performed years later, when on a retreat during the time that she was starting to remember what had happened and what its impact was, involved

[89] p.195
[90] p.195
[91] p.191

performing a ritual that she conducted to symbolise her removing the abuser's presence from her body,

> Over the course of ten days of silence, I made a series of drawings in which I pictured my body being cut open. Inside the length of my torso was an old, huge, gray penis around which my body had grown like a tree grows around a stone. Using pastels, colored pencils and watercolors as my 'surgical tools', I removed the old penis from the inside of my body, cutting all the blood vessels that had grown like roots around it.[92]

This "surgery" complete though, she was left with a gaping space where he had been, "An empty cavity was left. The patient looked like she might die on the operating table."[93] Although she sewed the "patient" back together, this hollow space remained.

She attributes a fuller healing to her realising the existence of a presence wholly different in its source and its nature to the presence of the abuser. In writing out how she saw The Unblessed Child, she wrote that in the middle of this child's pain, she also saw "a canopy of protection.[94] In a scenario in which protection would seem to be the least likely thing for her to be aware of, she remembers feeling certain that the abused child was surrounded by a positive presence during the acts of abuse, "I drew a picture of the child left for dead. She is blue. There is a cock in her mouth. Her eyes are closed. Red tears drop from her eyes. Around her head, a golden light circles her."[95]

Parker calls this "the Presence", and equates it to God, believing that it was this Presence that saved her life,

> This Presence could not stop the man from killing me, if he chose to. And, at the same time, it *could* stop him. Because, I knew, if he noticed it he *would* be stopped…You *couldn't* be aware of this Presence and do what this man was doing to me…The man did stop short of killing me, and I think it was because some part of him could not ultimately deny the knowledge that he was raping God. Not that I was God, obviously, but that the Presence was there and in raping me he was going against the Presence.[96]

In the context of the book within which Parker's narrative is told, the question is raised of how this presence can become known. One of the intentions of the book is to reject any view that it must be through violence that the presence of God is revealed, arguing, "*nobody* has to suffer for God to be made known to us."[97] Parker sees her awareness of

[92] p.207
[93] p.207
[94] p.75
[95] p.196
[96] p.212
[97] p.213

God's presence in the midst of, but not because of, the acts of abuse that were being carried out – the acts of abuse (and all violence) functioned as a denial of that presence.[98]

As a young child, during the years that the abuse was happening, Parker remembers how vital it was for her to maintain a sense of connection to her mother in spite of the severing of connection caused by her abuser's violence.[99] For Parker, healing is understood as the restoring or maintenance of connection with those other than the abuser, who she learned to be in relationship with in an entirely different way to the way that she was caught in relationship with the abuser. She sees this kind of relationship, through its difference, as confronting and healing what she had called an idolatrous relationship with the abuser,

> To be free from idolatry would require a different relationship at the core of my life – a relationship that wasn't one of possession, obedience, and terror; a relationship in which I did not bow down to the demands of self-abnegation and the dictates of fear. The 'Thou' I needed was more than the 'Thou' before whom no secret was hid. It was also the 'Thou' before whom no self-destructive service was required – a 'Thou' of mercy and freedom.[100]

Part of her healing is learning the difference between a genuinely loving and an "idolatrous" connection,

> Both our capacity for connection and our capacity for separation have to be cultivated into responses that are life-giving and life-sustaining. The power to hold and the power to let go, to connect and disconnect, each of these powers can be used for good or for ill. Ethical maturity learns the difference and knows the right time for each.[101]

Parker's chapters and the jointly authored Postlude of the book assert that a way in which the presence of God becomes known is through the presence of "steady witnesses",

> To know that the presence of God endures through violence is to know life holds more than its destruction…Salvation is sometimes possible. Salvation begins with the courage of witnesses whose gaze is steady. Steady witnesses neither flee in horror to hide their eyes, nor console with sweet words…Steady witnesses end the hidden life of violence by bringing it to public attention. They help to restore souls fragmented by violence. They accompany the journey to healing.[102]

---

[98] pp.9, 213
[99] pp.203-204
[100] pp.195-196
[101] p.197
[102] p.250

For healing to be a journey that is taken in relationship contrasts it with the destruction of relationship that Parker vividly describes as one of the consequences of abuse. She had first experienced this when thinking back to one of the acts of abuse, during which her perception of the protective presence that she sensed to be there manifested itself as her perception of the presence of people who were close to her, so that she begins to think of the presence of God as revealed in the relationships with people who care for her,

> I was on that bed again. I was feeling the terror again. I swallowed hard, going again into that place of not being able to breathe, believing that I was going to die. Then I saw that my mother and grandmother were there with me. They could see what Frank was doing. Their sight was powerful. They would not let him get away with it. I felt comforted and strengthened by their presence. Then, with slow dawning, I felt the space encompassed with a great love that held me and confronted Frank. It was a force-field of presence that encompassed Frank as well. I knew that even if Frank killed me, nothing would separate me from this presence. I would be taken up into all embracing arms.[103]

Recognising that healing will never involve the denial of the facts of abuse, Parker moves towards the conclusion of her chapter by emphasising the importance of presence as that which saves, sustains and heals,

> Whatever restoration we find comes always with the legacy of the harm done to us. Nothing erases violence, but, sometimes, the power of presence gets us through, literally saves us to live on, to heal, to work for justice.[104]

Sylvia Fraser, My Father's House

Sylvia Fraser was born in Hamilton, Ontario in 1935, the youngest of two daughters. Her book *My Father's House* tells the story of her childhood, of growing up, attending school, spending time with friends, later going to college, gaining a BA in English and Philosophy at the University of Western Ontario, getting married then divorced, and coping with the deaths of her parents. These events are told in the context of sexual abuse by her father, beginning as far back as she can remember, and continuing into her teenage years.

As the book begins, her family's household is presented as being outwardly respectable,

[103] p.210
[104] p.213

> My father's house was a three-story, frame building on a shady street in Hamilton, Ontario. Though our family found it hard to grow grass because of maple roots, our lawn was neatly trimmed, our leaves raked and our snow shoveled. No one drank in my father's house, no one smoked and no one took the Lord's name in vain. My mother planted a victory garden and canned the tomatoes. My sister and I made seasonal dandelion chains, leaf piles and snow angels. Though my father worked on shifts at the Steel Company of Canada, he always wore a white shirt, navy suit and tie to his job as a steel inspector – trace-memory of a family that had once been prosperous.
>
> Geographically, Hamilton is defined by a three-hundred foot escarpment, which everyone calls the Mountain, and Lake Ontario, which is its northern boundary. My father's house was located directly under the mountain brow. I was born into my father's house before noon on March 8, 1935…[105]

That the phrase "my father's house" is used four times in these opening sentences, in addition to its being the book's title, establishes that this was a household in which it was understood that ownership and control was held by the father, and that the author intends this to be significant in the events she then relates in the book.

Love and hate; bonding and dividing

The intensity of Fraser's relationship with her father is clear very soon into the start of the book,

> It is midday. My daddy, who works the night shift, is in his blue-striped pajamas. I hitch at the pink sunsuit that Granny Cragg made for me, waiting to be invited into his bedroom. My daddy gives me candies. My daddy gives me chocolate-chip cookies. Of all the people in the world, I'm my daddy's favorite. *My daddy and I…*
> …My daddy plays with my blond hair. "I had curls like that when I was your age." He plays with my belly button and jiggles pennies in his pocket. My daddy squeezes my legs between his knees…
> *…My daddy and I share secrets*.[106]

Fraser's descriptions of the abuse begin from a time shortly after she started school. Her father would bribe her with cookies, or with pennies, later ensuring her compliance by threatening to kill her kitten if she told anyone what was happening. Her father's abuse is, as far as she knows, how he loves her, and it makes her special, "Of all the people in the world, I'm my daddy's favourite. *My daddy and I…*"[107]

---

[105] Sylvia Fraser, *My Father's House*, p.3. All italics in citations of Fraser's book are as they are in the original text. Fraser writes in an author's note at the beginning of the book, "I have used italics to indicate thoughts, feelings and experiences pieced together from recently recovered memories, and to indicate dreams."
[106] pp.5-6
[107] p.5

> *I lie on my daddy's bed, face buried in his feather pillow. I shiver, because the window is open, the lace curtains are blowing and I haven't any clothes on. My daddy lies beside me in his shorts and undershirt, smelling of talcum. He rubs against me, still hot and wet from his bath. My daddy breathes very loudly, the way he does when he snores, and his belly heaves like the sunfish I saw on the beach at Van Wagners. Something hard pushes up against me, then between my legs and under my belly. It bursts all over me in a sticky stream. I hold my breath, feeling sick like when you spin on a piano stool until the seat falls off. I hear God say: 'You've been dirty, go naked!' When I pull my daddy's pillow over my head I get feathers up my nose.*[108]

When she began to protest against the abuse, and threatened to tell her mother what he was doing, he responded with a series of threats, eventually ending with the one that ensured her silence over the years that followed,

> *My father needs a permanent seal for my lips, one that will murder all defiance.*
> *"If you say once more that you're going to tell, I'm sending that cat of yours to the pound for gassing!"*
> *"I'll…I'll…I'll…"*
> *The air swooshes out of me as if I have been punched. My heart is broken. My resistance is broken. Smoky's life is in my hands. This is no longer a game, however desperate. Our bargain is sealed in blood.*[109]

Fraser's presentation of her relationship with her father is complex and messy. Terms she uses when writing about this relationship include love, hate, tender, violence, possession, innocence, slavery. Reflecting on this relationship as the book progresses, Fraser writes, "I do believe the relationship began in tenderness and even innocence."[110] Again, towards the end of the book, as she reflects back on her very earliest memory, she writes,

> I am an infant lying on my father's bed, being sexually fondled but blissfully unaware of any deception. Then I was treated with tenderness…I felt I was special, the chosen child, the princess. That lie had some truth. That lie was a blessing as well as a curse.[111]

The relationship is presented in terms of extremes. Thinking back many years later about their relationship, she imagines a mirror image of herself as a monster-animal-child hybrid. She tries to pull herself away from this creature that she sees, who is pronouncing her love for her father while marked by his violent ownership of her.

> I see a five-year-old child with matted hair and blue fangs staring back at me. Around her throat is the bloody mark of a broken leash. She lays her outstretched

[108] p.8
[109] p.12
[110] p.154
[111] p.241

> palms against mine. They fit mine exactly. We are one. She says: 'I love my daddy.'
>
> Before my eyes, the child grows older. Now she is eight, nine, ten, eleven…She, too, wears the bloodmark of her daddy's leash. I try to pull my palms away to blind my eyes but they're stuck to hers. She says: 'I love my daddy.'[112]

By the age of ten, she considers herself "*enslaved by her daddy*"[113], trapped in this relationship with him by her fear that non-compliance would result in withdrawal of "love", "*I'm afraid to complain because daddy won't love me won't love me love me*"; "*I hold my breath to keep from crying because daddy won't love me love me love me.*"[114]

After several pages of her repeatedly emphasising her desperation for a loving relationship with her father, she starts to write about her hated of him, "*Staring at my father's black boot, I boldly form the thought: I hate you!…God does not strike me dead. I do not turn to stone. I repeat: hate hate hate hate hate, enjoying the sharp taste of the word like a lozenge in my mouth.*"[115] As the book moves on, the hatred she feels towards him becomes increasingly passionate, and she fantasises about exacting violent revenge against him, "*Some day, monster, I'll stab you through the heart!*"[116] Her hatred of her father remains a silent mantra that she recites to herself (as she continues to recite her fear of losing his love), to the point that everyday activities, and simply his presence in a room, becomes cause for her internally repeating to herself how much she hates him,

> I match each step to its own bitter complaint, like prayers to beads, *with the voice of my other self chiming in with her even nastier contrapuntal:*
> I hate you father. *I hate you father.* Let me count the ways. *Let me count the ways.* I hate the way your gold tooth squeaks as you wolf down bread slabbed with butter *because it reminds me of the way you spread and stab and wolf me down*.
> I hate your listing armchair with the broken springs. *I hate your listing armchair with the broken springs* and the way it groans under your weight even when you aren't sitting on it *the way I groan under your weight when you are sitting on me*…
> …Mostly, what I hate *what I hate* is your flesh *is your flesh*. I hate it because…*because*…[117]

Her hatred is eventually what brings an end to the abuse, building up to a level where it explodes in a rage, to which her father simply concedes,

---

[112] pp.227-228
[113] p.33
[114] p.10, 11
[115] p.13
[116] p.87
[117] p.77

> *My other self lies naked on her daddy's bed. He is breathing heavily. So is she. What she feels is rage…As he rubs up against her with his penis like a poisonous toadstool, she silently repeats her litany: I hate, I hate, I hate, I hate, I hate…a choo-choo train getting up steam.*
> *As daddy pushes her head down to his crotch, she at last gets out the words: 'I hate you!" She smashes her left fist into his belly. 'Touch me again, and I'll kill you!" She punches and punches like her mother kneading bread dough. He doesn't resist. He doesn't fight back.*
> *So that is all it took, would have taken.*[118]

Nevertheless, she experiences her feeling of hatred as deeply negative and destructive, as leading to a guilt that ends up redirecting itself towards her. She describes it as, "a serpent that turns back on me, infecting me with the poison of self-loathing."[119]

For Fraser, trying to live with a simultaneous desperate love and deep and violent hatred of the same person reached a point of becoming impossible. At this point, Fraser found herself "splitting" in two, creating a "secret accomplice": "somewhere around the age of seven, I acquired another self with memories and experiences separate from mine, whose existence was unknown to me…She loved my father, freeing me to hate him."[120] This secret accomplice, who she calls her "other self", or "The Child Who Knows", became the one who was "his guilty sex partner and my mother's jealous rival, allowing me to lead a more normal life." [121] The "normal life" was lived as a person who Fraser, even at the time, called "Appearances." Appearances was greatly successful, excelled at school, and was socially very popular. Fraser sees Appearances' job as being "to demonstrate that everything was super keen when I was most despairing."[122]

However, the life that Appearances led was always experienced as somehow detached from the world that everyone else lived in. Fraser frequently refers to feeling split and detached from her body, "Everything about my body seems strange, as if it were not really part of me"[123], which she relates to the split between her and her "other self". One of the features of this distance is a lack of sensation in her body, "I don't feel the cold. Or heat. Or anything at all…I can burn my arm with a cigarette and not feel it."[124] One of her chapters is titled, "A Severed Head", in which she describes herself as a

[118] p.103
[119] p.77
[120] p.15
[121] p.15
[122] p.65
[123] p.74
[124] pp.80, 101

"disembodied creature", in search for her "discarded body."[125] Remembering the point at which she first split herself in two, she describes the experience as unscrewing her head from her body, "as if it were the lid of a pickle jar."[126] She experienced a gulf between her and everything and everyone around her. As a teenager, she feels as though she is living her life as a performer in a play, pretending to be someone else, but finding the effort of the performance increasingly exhausting.[127]

Although Appearances allowed her to live an outwardly "normal life", the two selves exist in competition with each other. Fraser recalls a point in her late teens when maintaining the split becomes almost unbearable, and there is a shift in power between her and her "other self", as the other self turns on her and the relationship between the two becomes dangerously hostile,

> Now the split between what I am and what I pretend to be is so wide I can barely straddle the gap…Once this puppet was my slave, made up of shiny bits and pieces of what other people admired. She performed in my name. I held the strings. She protected me. Now she is a caricature of what I want her to be. Appearances is my enemy, mocking me, serving me up. She is destroying me by destroying herself…I let her know I'm alive by torturing her. I slop scalding water over her when she's draining the turnips. I trip her when she runs for the bus. She has broken her strings but she is not free of me. We are held together by an umbilical cord of pain.[128]

The legacy of abuse in relationship

As Fraser grew up, the split that she describes as existing between the two halves of herself meant that she found it impossible to experience relationships that felt real to her. Writing about Appearances, who was always popular, she remembers that from her point of view the relationships she had felt fake, "She did not react to real circumstances out of real emotion. She was programmed like a computer and, like a computer, she played to rule."[129] In her account of growing up, she presents herself as becoming less happy and more exhausted as time goes on, as her energy goes into maintaining the separation between selves, trying to prevent her "other self" from appearing on the

[125] pp.134-135
[126] p.221
[127] p.79
[128] pp.101-102
[129] p.65

surface. These circumstances make the sociable front that she presents increasingly difficult and tiring, and her popularity is not something she is able to enjoy,

> My face seems to be melting into the quicksilver, revealing something twisted and mocking behind it…Closing my eyes, I steady myself against the sharp corner of my dresser, suddenly weary, as if I were preparing for the hundredth performance of a play that wasn't very good in the first place. I don't want to go. I never have a good time, no matter who I'm with, and it's getting harder to pretend.[130]

Fraser also looks at how she sees her sexual relationships as being influenced by having been abused. She characterises these relationships as a constant battle between trying to behave in a way that is expected of her, while fear continually bubbles as she makes connections between what she is doing now and what her father has done before,

> Joe links arms, forcing me to even greater intimacy and an even slower beat, *and making my other self very, very nervous. She cannot bear to be held or confined*…I make the mistake of taking my hand out of my pocket to brush a snowflake. Joe commandeers it. *My other self panics*. How long before I can brush another snowflake and get it back without seeming rude?[131]

Fraser writes that her high school years are the most difficult for her to remember because, even though she assumes that the sexual abuse had all but stopped, her school life, which she had previously used to escape the sexual threats in her house, was now charged with a similar threat,

> Now that sex had invaded my peer world, that world had become almost as threatening. Because of overlapping territories, what had begun as a leakage of emotion between my other self and me had become a hemorrage. Never was it more necessary for me to keep my personalities separate, yet never was it more difficult.[132]

She remembers reaching a point when it became clear to her that she would need to make more of an effort to keep the personalities separate, and keep Appearances going, when her friends start asking questions and making observations about how she avoided relationships with boys. She recounts their puzzled queries, "you get such a b-i-g crush on a guy, then when he likes you, you don't want him any more…The guys say you go out with them a couple of times then you ditch them." Forced to think about this question, Fraser is again aware of two personalities competing, "'They all bore me. They're so possessive. They make me' – *panic as if I were smothering* – 'bored!' I

[130] p.79
[131] pp.44-45
[132] p.66

stand up, feeling my head spin with the record. Perforated walls, *the color of flesh*, press in upon me."[133]

Forcing herself to keep up the front that fits with her friends' behaviour, she resorts to acting in the same ways as them, allocating the task of sexual relationships back to her "other self", so she remains untouched by them,

> Daniel reaches for my hand. I surrender it, *automatically withdrawing all sensation, unaware that I am doing so, leaving only the wax model resting against his palm, almost as convincing as one from Madame Tussaud's*…Safely at a distance, Daniel seems irresistible. As he lays his palm on my bare back to guide me onto the dance floor, *I experience a tremor of sexual arousal which I repress, unaware that I am doing so. On instructions from my other self, who considers sex her territory, I replace it with something less dangerous* – ennui.[134]

With the boy whom she later married, she would scream at him, looking for faults and criticising him for anything she could find. In looking back at these fights, she regards them as tests, as trying to push him to the limits of leaving her, while desperately not wanting to be alone,

> I pick fights with Danny – *wilful, irrational fights, that indicate my other self is back in charge*. Every bruised expectation, every statement with a possible double meaning is ransacked for its worst intention…
> …I am a fist punching anything that ventures within range: how dare you do this to me? I am a high-voltage fence: touch me and you pay. I am a black widow spider, interpreting tenderness as weakness, fearing love as subjugation, forever threatening to devour my mate…
> …I am terrified he will leave.
> I am terrified he will stay…
> *… See? Didn't I warn you? Am I still beautiful when I'm screaming? See what power I have to inflict pain? How much of this can you take?*[135]

Her yearning for relationship, combined with a continuing suspicion and fear of it, pervades all manner of relationships. Meeting her future husband's family for the first time, she relates an idyllic picture of the happy family, which she at the same time loved and longed to be part of, but from which she also kept her distance, "I am warmed. Yet I keep my distance like a feral cat circling a bonfire. I don't know what else to do."[136] She experiences her life then with this deep sense of disconnection with everyone and everything, feeling cast out of the world and forced to continue in her detached

[133] p.72
[134] pp.80-82
[135] pp.117-118
[136] p.112

performance of life, "*on and ever on she danced, for dance she must, even through the dark nights, forsaken by all the world and cursed by the holy angels of God.*"[137]

Monsters, demons, and bodily possession

In outlining the two selves through which she lived her life of abuse and her life of achievements and friendships, the child who took on the role of her father's "guilty sex partner" is described as being a "guilty body possessed by daddy." [138] The language of possession is used at numerous points throughout the book as a way that Fraser articulates her understanding of her relationship with her father. The first time she uses this term is in describing her fear of pregnancy,

> 'the idea of pregnancy itself is…pretty horrendous to me. it's so…parasitic…' *like having daddy's wet-ums inside me for nine months, possessing me, growing larger…helpless…out of control…guilt shame fear fear fear… My other self is quite clear about her warnings:* If you get pregnant *I won't be able to stand it and* you will go stark raving crazy.[139]

From the opening pages, Fraser describes her fear as a child in terms of a fear of monsters and demons that surrounded her bed at night. She was terrified they were going to sneak themselves into her body, and turn her into a version of themselves,

> I cry when my mother puts me to bed. I didn't used to be afraid of the dark but now I know that demons and monsters hide in the cubbyholes by my bed…*I can hear the monster in the cubbyhole by my bed, even with my fingers in my ears. I can see his big hairy belly, even with my eyes scrunched. I can smell his stink like chicken guts…I know if I fall asleep with my mouth open he'll crawl inside me forever, and then I'll grow crinkly hair and a slimy wet-ums*.[140]

Looking back on her childhood fear of the monsters that lived around her bed, Fraser tries to understand this fear as a way that she tried to ensure her terror was something that came from outside herself, which she supposes was preferable to being afraid of something inside herself.[141] Memories that she had as an adult suggest that this attempt to locate the source of terror outside herself was a task that became too big a challenge, "Now when my daddy plays with me I feel smothered, as if I'm drowning.

[137] p.105
[138] p.221
[139] p.132
[140] pp.8, 12
[141] pp.15-16

My head grows dizzy with fatigue…*I struggle to separate myself from that which possesses me*."[142]

Fraser's ongoing fear of demons and monsters that will crawl inside her becomes its most vivid in a chapter entitled "Satan's Child", in which she writes about dreams that she had around the time that she had a hysterectomy in her mid forties. Descriptions of these dreams are woven in between her telling the events before and while she was in the hospital. After being told that surgery was necessary, she describes a dream in which she was searching frantically for a lost purse. Eventually, her search brings her to a cleft in some rock, "*A voice intones: 'This is where the evil comes from.' A child's hand reaches out. It's covered in slime and blood*."[143]

As the dreams continue during her time in the hospital, they take her into this cleft,

> *I climb down the perilous passage into the cave. A blond child is curled like a cat around her swollen belly. A demon-monster raped her here many years ago by stuffing a giant white larva down her throat. Now it has lodged in her womb, threatening her life. I fetch a priest. Dressed in white robes and mask, he raises his silver dagger with both hands, then plunges it into the girl's abdomen…*
> *…Inside the blond girl's womb the priest finds a fetus, half-human, half-animal. He holds it up by one cleft foot. 'See Satan's child.'*[144]

Fraser is located in the dream as a reporter, and as a member of the press she has released to her a computer photo of the father of "Satan's Child". The picture of the father shows him as "apelike", three times the size of a human, and covered in fur. As his face, the father has "*a devil's mask with holes for mouth and eyes*."[145] When she looks at this monster, she feels sure that she has seen it before, but cannot understand this.

The blond child is declared to be responsible for "Satan's Child" because she produced it. Fraser's reporter character makes the trip to an island where this "demon-monster" lives,

> *It's even uglier than I thought, with scarlet mouth and bright green dangling warts. As I struggle back to the mainland, the monster comes shrieking in lust after me. Close up, he's more like an ordinary ape, but very savage, with vivid blue eyes and slathering razor teeth. He overtakes me when I'm still dangling*

[142] p.194
[143] p.212
[144] pp.212-213
[145] p.213

> *over muddy water. I scream. The blond girl recalls him to the island, but not before he scrapes me with his filthy coat, leaving his rank smell on me.*[146]

The chapter closes with Fraser's statement of the fear she was left with, "in getting ride of the gnarled tissue in my womb, I couldn't shake the disconcerting belief that I had aborted Satan's child."[147]

After her father's death, Fraser passes through the most intense time of remembering the events of abuse that had taken place many years earlier. At times, these memories manifest themselves physically, as she has convulsions and spasms that she interprets as like those she had as a child while her father was abusing her. In reflecting back on this time, once she is able to search the experience for clues as to what it might mean or how she felt at the time, Fraser writes,

> I have more convulsions as my body acts out other scenarios, sometimes springing from nightmares, leaving my throat ulcerated and my stomach nauseated. So powerful are these contractions that sometimes I feel as if I were struggling for breath against a slimy lichen clinging to my chest, invoking thoughts of the incubus who, in medieval folklore, raped sleeping women who then gave birth to demons. Similarly, as my bed shakes with the violence of my fits, I recall the child Regan in the movie The Exorcist, riding her bed like a brass bronco, in the throes of demon possession. In a more superstitious society, I might have been diagnosed as a child possessed by the devil. What, in fact, I had been possessed by was daddy's forked instrument – the devil in man.[148]

<u>Love, forgiveness and resolution</u>

> Though my restored memories come wrapped in terror, it is a child's terror that I realize I must feel in order to expel. Thus, the adult me comforts the child, holds her hand, pities her suffering, forgives her for her complicity, assuages her guilt. She has carried the burden until I was prepared to remember our joint history without bitterness. I feel only relief, release, compassion, even elation. The mysteries of a lifetime, shadowy deeds dimly suspected, have been clarified.[149]

Having emphasised how her experience of sexual abuse effectively destroyed any ability for her to experience relationships as safe or even real, when she begins a relationship with the man who will become her husband, her gradual learning how to be in a loving relationship and release of fear she would previously have felt is presented as an important part of her beginning to feel genuinely human, "Danny lays his arm across

[146] p.213
[147] p.217
[148] pp.222-223
[149] p.223

the back of my seat. I am more shy than wary as he leans over to kiss me. As I grow used to his arms, I cling to him, overriding fear: So this is how other girls feel. Against all the possibilities I am real after all. I am human."[150] But the frequent surfacing of her "other self" continues to threatens this relationship, preventing genuine closeness and demanding recognition,

> And so the handsome prince kissed the sleeping princess and…and…
> No, it doesn't quite work that way. This is real life, after all.
> Even now, I can't trust.
> Even now, I dare not trust.
> *My other self is still wary, bitter, case-hardened, vengeful, jealous, frightened, furious, egocentric, inventive and sly. She is not going to give up the bones and nettles of her autonomy without a stringent test. Before I am going to be allowed to love anyone, she is going to have to display her entire ragbag of hurts and furies*.[151]

Throughout the book, Fraser presents the tension between the personality who knows about the abuse, and the one who does not, as continually disruptive and threatening to her living in a way that feels real to her and appears normal to the people around her. In the later chapters this tension builds, until it reaches a point at which she can no longer keep the two personalities separate, "*My other self paces her underground prison, trailing cobwebs like a rotting bridal veil, remembering that she was once a princess. She telephones, jarring me from a sound sleep: 'I'm coming up.'*"[152] The process she relates of her acknowledging "the Child Who Knows" is filled with violent re-enactments of her experience of abuse, with despair to the point of planning her suicide, and the breakdown of her marriage, but she considers her acknowledging this child and her knowledge as vital to her being able to live in a different way.

After slowly recovering memories of the abuse, in the final chapters, collectively titled "Resolution", Fraser addresses what she has remembered to her parents. Although she had never imagined that she would ever tell her mother about the abuse, she eventually gives in to the demands of "the Child who Knows", "I came to feel a powerful need…not I, but the damaged child in me. Her last act: the need to tell mommy."[153]

[150] pp.109-110
[151] p.113
[152] p.161
[153] p.231

In the final chapter, she turns to her father. Fraser realises that the process she takes herself through with regard to changing her thoughts and feelings towards her father only became possible after his death, "As in the child's game of statues, we remained frozen at our darkest hour, with no possibility of forgiveness or compassion or redemption while he lived."[154] Realising that she barely knew her father in any way besides their abusive relationship, she begins with a desire to come to a better knowledge of who he was. In the process, she moves from seeing him as demonic and monstrous towards seeing him as a hurt person who never escaped that hurt,

> This I do know: my father was not a monster. His life was a bud that never opened, blighted by the first frost. His crime became his prison, his guilt his bars. He served his sentence as I have served mine, but his was for life, whereas I got off after forty-seven years for reasonably good behavior.[155]

Pitying her father leads then to forgiveness, which she sees as necessary for her own wellbeing – "I forgive my father so I can forgive myself, so I can embrace with compassion that fierce and grieving child"[156] – and a way of integrating into her adult personality the love that her "other self" had felt towards her father, "I also forgive my father because I love him. That is the biggest shock of all. Not only that I loved him once but that I love him even now."[157]

The graphic descriptions of abuse, and of its impact on her, that make up the bulk of the book make it clear that Fraser does not see the violence of sexual abuse as something to be blotted out by the decision to forgive, and in the Postscript she writes,

> Sex between an adult and a child always involves emotional and physical brutality. It is a crime that cripples, usually for life. That some people do survive, that emotional health often requires the abused to forgive the abuser does not make the crime more acceptable.[158]

The decision that Fraser makes is of what attitude to take towards past abuse, and this leaves her able to "put to death" those people and those attitudes that she feels needed to be put to death, choosing to leave behind caricatures, and to leave behind bad memories and replace them with good,

[154] p.240
[155] p.241
[156] p.241
[157] p.241
[158] p.252

So that is it. My other self is dead. My father is dead. The king is dead. The princess is dead…I have been released from the monster that never was. Now I can close the coffin, truly close it.

X X X X

O O O O O

Good-bye, good-bye.[159]

Moving from Silence to Speech

I opened this chapter by looking at the experience of what I called "living in silence", thinking about how childhood sexual abuse might force a child (and later, adult) into what has been called a "mute" state, unable to communicate about her experience of abuse. To give an idea of the agony of this state of having been made speechless, I drew on the image Nelle Morton gives of a face contorted in pain, and "a woman's throat open with a cry so great the cry could not come to sound." I then looked at how women might try to communicate their abuse when they cannot do so verbally, and I considered "self mutilation" as a kind of silent speech, or a "mute prayer". As stated, aspects of the personal accounts of childhood sexual abuse above have the potential to aid the movement from this state of agonised silence and the isolation this brings, towards the act of speaking about the experience of abuse, which means that those experiences (and the people who speak them) then occupy a place among others.

Moving from silence to speech requires a language. Located, as we almost invariably are, in an environment that is verbal, by verbalising our experiences we arrange them into a format such that they belong in that verbal environment. This has been the task of this chapter – to begin to verbalise possible aspects of an experience of childhood sexual abuse. These three personal accounts of experiences of childhood sexual abuse and the aftermath of those experiences have been presented at length in order that something of their complexity has been shown, and also that the ideas I will now pick up on and take forward into the chapters that follow have been seen in the contexts of these women's stories. From here, the task is to take several ideas raised by these accounts, and to enter into an in-depth exploration of those ideas.

[159] p.242

In the next chapter, then, I will focus on and develop specific terms that show aspects of these experiences to be particularly significant to Christian communities. The intention is to show how these experiences can be articulated in ways that draw connections with themes that are relevant in a Christian context; that it is possible for these experiences to be understood as having meanings that belong in Christian communities.

Chapter Four
Meanings That Belong in Christian Communities

> I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt so that you would no longer be slaves to the Egyptians; I broke the bars of your yoke and enabled you to walk with heads held high.
>
> Leviticus 26:12-13

> I see a five-year-old child with matted hair and blue fangs staring back at me. Around her throat is the bloody mark of a broken leash…
> …What, in fact, I had been possessed by was daddy's forked instrument – the devil in man.
>
> Sylvia Fraser[1]

Meanings That Belong

When I set out the central question to be addressed in the thesis, I identified two aspects to this question that are incorporated in it. The first was concerned with how experiences of childhood sexual abuse can have *meanings that belong* in Christian communities; that is, that they be articulated in words that are relevant in these communities. This chapter is intended to provide a response to this half of the question.

The purpose of setting out the three personal accounts of childhood sexual abuse presented in the previous chapter was that particular terms or images that they raise can now be developed in depth, in relation to the wider contexts of the particular women who used these terms to express their own experiences, and also in relation to the wider context of the location of Christian communities with which this study is concerned. In this chapter, I choose to focus in depth on two of the terms that were seen in these accounts, with the conviction that developing these particular terms will be of value in the larger goal of finding and demonstrating ways in which past experiences of childhood sexual abuse can be understood in ways that belong in Christian communities.

Before turning to look at the two terms I have chosen, it is necessary to consider the details and the scope of the task that is carried out in this chapter. The goal of

[1] Sylvia Fraser, *My Father's House: A Memoir of Incest and of Healing* (London: Viagro, 1999), pp.227, 223

speaking using words that belong in Christian communities is one that could be met with a great number of other terms, and the two that form the basis of this chapter are examples that are developed in order to show the possibility of speaking meaningfully about the experience of childhood sexual abuse. The chapter is intended to be illustrative of the possibility of speaking in depth about this experience, in terms that are not alien to the Christian community, but are part of its vocabulary.

The chapter shows that it is possible for women's experiences of childhood sexual abuse to be spoken and understood in terms that are meaningful in a Christian context, and therefore that Christian women are wronged whenever these experiences are not seen as being meaningful in this place. It demonstrates that it is not necessary for these experiences to be spoken merely in clinical terms, the use of which means that these experiences are seen as having significance in a clinical location, but gives no indication of why they fully belong in a Christian context and understood in terms that are part of the language spoken in this context. It also demonstrates the richness of experience that can be explored when clinical language and diagnostic categories are not permitted to dictate the parameters of the discussion. In presenting an in-depth exploration of how experience of childhood sexual abuse can be explored and understood in two particular terms, the chapter shows the possibility of women's taking other terms of their own choosing, reflecting on terms that are personally evocative in order that their own experiences could be framed within the vocabulary of a community to which otherwise these experiences of abuse remain alienated.

The two terms to be developed here are those of ***possession*** and ***idolatry***. A feeling conveyed by all three of the authors whose accounts I looked at in the previous chapter was that of a lasting presence of the abuse, described in all three accounts as a lingering physical presence of something inside their bodies. I saw the potential for theologically significant reflection on this feeling when two of the three accounts used the term "possession" in describing the lasting impact of rape. The first section of this chapter will explore the term "possession", looking at three aspects of this term that can be considered relevant to the context of child sexual abuse.

Connected to the idea of possession, the second term to be explored arises from the authors' thoughts on their relationships with the abuser, and the impact of abuse on

other relationships. While reading these three accounts with the intention of focussing on images within them that could be developed theologically, an image that stood out for me was Rebecca Parker's characterisation of the relationship with her abuser as "idolatrous"[2]. The second part of this chapter will be devoted to considering the term "idolatry" as having potential to illuminate the nature of an abusive relationship, and the impact that that relationship and the events of abuse might have on the abused person's other relationships.

The reason behind the development of these two words is that over the very long period of searching for some meaning to my experiences (and during this period, reading the three texts presented in chapter three), these are the two ideas that have been especially significant to me. The process of arriving at the development of these ideas is comparable to Martha Ramsey's description of her own search for meaning, which I discussed in the previous chapter. I identified with what Ramsey had been attempting to achieve through experimenting with different possible meanings of her experience, and with her commitment to the project of her book; namely, to develop this so that she reached a point of being able to discover some meaning to give to her experience. I also appreciated her turning to classical works of literature in her search for someone somewhere thinking about rape. To be able to talk or write about her own experience of rape, she searched for other places in which the subject matter was at least mentioned, even if she found the way it was mentioned there to be inadequate.

Identifying with the women in these myths, she began to feel a sense of connection with someone and something, even if it was mythical. She would pick out those parts of the tales that resonated with her own experience of rape and the events that followed. For example, feeling hurt by the rape and insignificant and powerless during the legal process that followed, Ramsey identified with similar themes in the classical myths she read, "They [the women who had been raped] were simply hurt, or they turned into something else – sometimes both. I recognized the way these girls had small parts in their own stories."[3] In her own context of going through the trial of her rapist, and in the process events being taken out of her control by the adults around her who made

[2] Rebecca Ann Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), p.195
[3] Martha Ramsey, *Where I Stopped: Remembering an Adolescent Rape* (San Diego; New York; London: Harvest, 1995), p.144

arrangements and decisions, it is the "small parts" that these mythical characters play in their own stories that stands out to Ramsey. In the same way, the images that stood out of the three accounts in the previous chapter did so in part because they were images that resonated with my own experience. These authors had found names I found it appropriate to give to my experiences, and words with which to describe them.

The content of this chapter is therefore not intended to be generalisable – a claim which would have resulted in stark dissonance in the context of a study that resists the imposing of meaning onto the experiences of others. The content of the chapter is presented as an illustration of the process of a person's articulating the experience of childhood sexual abuse in terms that have theological significance. The two terms through which I carry out this task are terms through which I have found it possible to articulate for myself aspects of my own experiences of childhood sexual abuse in such a way that situated these experiences in the Christian context in which I was located. The content of the exercise is less important than the fact that the exercise has been carried out. The content of the exercise may be applicable only to my own situation at a particular point in time, but the fact that the exercise has been carried out demonstrates the possibility of the experience of abuse being spoken using words that are part of Christian speech. By looking at these two terms, possession and idolatry, the intention is to piece together some ways of talking about the experience of child sexual abuse, and the impact and meaning it may have, and to do so with a theological vocabulary so that these past experiences of childhood sexual abuse are understood in a way that secures for them a place and a home in Christian communities.

Possession

> Possession…subsists on an elemental tension between the exterior and the interior of the body, as spirits enter into the person's physical territory and assume control. By implication, avoidance of demonic possession involves vigilance over the surface of the body and its interactions with the outside environment. The physical self contains the individual's identity; possession involves both transgression of the boundaries of selfhood and a destabilization of the victim's identity.
>
> Nancy Caciola[4]

[4] Nancy Caciola, *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 2003), p.44

The word "possession" is a provocative and potentially dangerous term that is used in different ways in different contexts. A consideration of some of its different meanings and uses is necessary in order to appreciate the complexity of the term possession as a way of articulating and understanding experiences of women who have been abused, especially if we are to reject harmful practices that may arise from certain understandings of the term in particular contexts. In looking at the different facets of the term possession, my focus was on thinking about the relational mechanics of possession so that this term could help to articulate one way of understanding the nature of the relationship between abuser and child.

The Oxford English Dictionary lists six definitions for the word "possession". One definition of the word is "the action or fact of holding something (material or immaterial) as one's own or in one's control". So in this sense, to be possessed by a person is to be held, owned, controlled by that person. A second definition of possession is in terms of property – a possession is something that is held and belongs to a person or power (such as a country or state). Thirdly possession is defined as "Domination of a person's heart, mind, or soul by a person or other agent", or "by an idea, thought, feeling." Fourthly, possession is defined as the "Domination or control of a person by a demon or spirit", or as "a change in mental disposition, a substitution of personality." A fifth definition refers to "The action of seizing or possessing oneself of something", and the act of possessing a woman sexually. Finally, possession is defined as "Mastery, command, or control of oneself, one's mind or feelings."

A Safeguard: the question of demonic possession

It is important to begin by clarifying how possession is *not* being understood as an impact of child sexual abuse. Possession here is not being used as in the fourth definition of the term (the first part of it, at any rate) – it is *not* being thought of in this context as spiritual or demonic possession of the abused child. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, there are practices associated with the belief that children who have been

sexually abused are demon possessed, and these practices can cause great harm.[5] Secondly, this is not the sense in which the term is used in the accounts presented in chapter three – rather, the reported experience of possession is set up in contrast to demon possession and used to elucidate the features of a particular kind of human relationship.

Literature on the impact and responses to child sexual abuse draws attention to the danger of beliefs in spiritual possession as a consequence of sexual abuse, and the harm that can be caused to abused children and adults by the practice of so-called "deliverance ministries" intended to cast out the spirits or demons that are believed to dwell inside them because they were abused.

Margaret Kennedy is the founder and co-ordinator of CSSA (Christian Survivors of Sexual Abuse) and MACSAS (Minister and Clergy Sexual Abuse Survivors). She discusses detrimental attitudes and beliefs that may confront Christian men and women who have been sexually abused, identifying as one potentially destructive teaching the belief that when a child is abused then evil has entered his/her body. She notes that this is a belief especially prevalent in some evangelical or charismatic traditions, warning that such a belief has the tendency to lead to views about healing and deliverance that is very likely to exacerbate the harm already caused to the person who has been abused. Kennedy reports, "At the extreme, emotional trauma is sometimes seen as demonic possession; sin has entered in"[6], with the response to such a view often being the practice of deliverance ministries.

Referencing a survey conducted by Safety Net (a group of evangelical Christians who have been abused) on deliverance ministries, Kennedy cites the group's finding that almost half of those surveyed had experienced deliverance ministries as harmful.[7] She cites people who have been subjected to deliverance ministries as a church's response to their sexual abuse as saying that the experience was "like having my insides pulled out",

---

[5] See Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, *Time for Action: Sexual abuse, the Churches and a New Dawn for Survivors* (London: Church House Publishing, 2002), pp.56-58, 129-131; Margaret Kennedy, "Christianity and Child Sexual Abuse – the Survivors' Voice Leading to Change", *Child Abuse Review* 9 (2000), pp.126-127

[6] Margaret Kennedy, "Christianity and Child Sexual Abuse – the Survivors' Voice Leading to Change", *Child Abuse Review* 9 (2000), p.127

[7] Kennedy, "Christianity and Child Sexual Abuse", p.127. Statistic originally published in Patricia Fouque, "Abuse in Ministry", *Ministry Today* 10, (1997)

being "paralysed with fear", and of people who had experienced these ministries being left in a worse state than they had been in already.[8] Such "ministries", Kennedy writes, lead to a person who was abused feeling contaminated, or "tainted by the evil of abuse", which only adds to the stigma they likely already feel.[9]

The decision to use the term possession to explore the possible impact of abuse is taken with these potential dangers in mind, and with the knowledge that "possession", as it may be used by some fundamentalist groups to describe what they see as a consequence of child sexual abuse, is associated with further abuse of people who have already suffered far more harm than any person should. However, the fact remains that the term *is* used in two of the written accounts presented in the previous chapter, when these authors describe the nature of their experiences, and it is used in a number of other accounts which will be referred to in this chapter. While the term is evocative of negative and harmful responses to abuse, these authors' uses of the term differ from such uses in at least two significant ways.

One way is that neither of the uses of the term possession in these texts intends for the term to be taken to mean a demonic or a spiritual possession. Both Parker and Fraser clearly use the term as a way of describing a relationship of abuser and child. Fraser notes that, while certain aspects of her behaviour were similar to that of the depiction of demon possession, her own experience is not one of spiritual possession. She deliberately presents her own experience of possession in contrast to an experience of demon possession, commenting that while in a different context the "diagnosis" may well have been that she was possessed by the devil, her own understanding of it is as a possession by "daddy's forked instrument – the devil in man."[10] In these accounts, possession is not presented as invasion by a spirit, or a state from which deliverance or exorcism was a possibility.

Another significant difference between these uses of possession, and the use of possession in some charismatic or evangelical groups, is that here the term is being used

[8] Kennedy, "Christianity and Child Sexual Abuse", p.127
[9] Kennedy, "Christianity and Child Sexual Abuse", p.127. The same point is also made in Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, *Time for Action*, when the report discusses the inappropriateness and the harm caused by deliverance ministries with people who have been sexually abused (pp.129-131). Stephen Parsons' book *Ungodly Fear* (Oxford: Lion Publishing, 2000) also criticises the use of exorcism as forced by some fundamentalist leaders and groups onto people who have been sexually abused.
[10] Fraser, *My Father's House*, p223

by people who have been abused. In each case it is being used by an individual who has been abused, to describe her own experience. There is no indication of the word having been applied to her experience by a voice or group more powerful than the abused person; it is not being used by one group to describe the experiences of another, without her consent. The term is not used and explored in a way that assumes to impose this word as a description of the experience of another person. This differentiation is important, as it is the dynamic within which a term is used that determines whether that term is then open to abuse.

The exploration of the term possession in this chapter does not seek to suggest at all that sexually abused children may be demon possessed. The terminology of possession is used in these accounts as a way of describing a human relationship, and comparisons are made to demon possession as a way of deepening the description while at the same time drawing a contrast. My own use of resources on demon and spirit possession carries similar intentions – I draw on these as resources to help in deepening an understanding of this distinct use of the term "possession" to describe a human relationship.

A multi-faceted understanding of possession

There are three aspects of the dictionary definition of the term "possession" that can be usefully explored with the intention of developing ways of speaking about childhood sexual abuse in a language that already has a place in Christian communities. Firstly, I will consider possession in terms of ownership, as referring to one person belonging to another. Secondly, I will look at issues of domination and control in the way that possession is understood, thinking in particular about the mechanics of possession and how control is taken and exercised. Thirdly, I will look at possible implications that a relationship of possession might have for a person's sense of identity, purpose and belonging.

1. Possession as ownership

In all three of the accounts presented in the previous chapter, there are struggles over rights of ownership. One of the ways that childhood sexual abuse impacts these three women is in the theft of what once belonged to them in their external worlds – the theft of aspects of their environments that they no longer perceive as their own. Parker describes how the secrecy imposed on her by the abuse caused the loss of relationships within her family. After giving warm and positive descriptions of life in her family home, she writes, "The experience with Frank separated me from all this. I couldn't tell them what was happening to me. I couldn't express my distress and fear. I couldn't explain my rage. I couldn't ask for help."[11] Years later, returning to the place where the abuse had taken place, Parker decides, when standing in front of the house the abuser used to live in, that she needs to take something from him in light of what he had stolen from her, and so takes a handful of earth from in front of his house to take away with her, "'I'm taking this from you,' I said silently. 'I'm taking your ground because of everything you took from me.'"[12]

As mentioned in the previous chapter, in Fraser's account, the issue of her father's overriding ownership is immediately set out as significant simply from the book's title, *My Father's House*, and the repetition of this phrase in the opening of the book. Fraser recalls the terror she felt when her father's ownership threatened to encroach on spaces that she thought of as hers,

> I run up the attic stairs with my books under one arm, then stop so abruptly I almost tumble down. My father, wearing once-good trousers held together with patches and pins, is lying on his side replacing floorboards. *'No! no! no!'* shrieks my other self. '*This is MY room. It belongs to ME*!'[13]

This image of her father's house as a place in which she presents the space as territory that could be claimed, held, taken and owned, sits alongside her descriptions of her father taking possession of her body – her body being set apart as his and for his purposes.

In her descriptions of how she managed to split herself into two, Fraser emphasises the need for her to create a separate personality to belong to her father, so that she could keep one for herself, and this one could continue in its relations to others around her. At times, she describes both personalities in terms of ownership. The

[11] Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes*, p188
[12] Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes*, p.184
[13] Fraser, *My Father's House*, p.73

personality she keeps for herself is the one she refers to using "I", and this one is described as "the majority shareholder."[14] The other is clearly understood as owned by her father, portrayed by Fraser as, "the child who knows, with guilty body possessed by daddy."[15] Her description of the relationship between her father and "the child who knows" as a relationship of owner and slave emphasises this aspect of possession as ownership. In addition when she presents the image of her five-year-old self as having "fangs", with the mark of a broken leash around her neck, the point is pushed further, she suggests ownership of an animal rather than a person.

The experience of feeling owned by the man who has sexually abused her could be interpreted in a Christian community as a psychological feature of a particular woman, a dysfunction that results from trauma. But it is also possible to consider this sense of ownership in relation to stories that are part of Christianity's heritage, and in doing so to place these women's experiences among these stories that belong in Christian tradition.

A number of texts on sexual abuse and the treatment of this issue in churches draw a connection between current understandings and treatment of women who have been sexually abused, with biblical records of the way in which women, and specifically sexually abused women, were regarded and treated.[16] A point that is made repeatedly is that in Old Testament texts on sexual relations, and in those narratives of sexual assault, the concern is almost never with the protection of women as persons who may be exploited, but with the protection of women as the property of men.[17]

---

[14] Fraser, *My Father's House*, p.24
[15] Fraser, *My Father's House*,, p.221
[16] Pamela Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar: Violence Against Women and the Church's Response* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), Marie Marshall Fortune, *Sexual Violence: The Unmentionable Sin* ((New York: Pilgrim Press, 1984), pp.44-61, Annie Imbens and Ineke Jonker, *Christianity and Incest*, trans. Patricia McVay (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), pp.189-263.
[17] Marie Marshall Fortune refers to a number of texts in which this is evident. She draws attention to the fact that in the laws in Leviticus on prohibited sexual relations, on prohibited sexual relations there is a "conspicuous absence" of any prohibition against sexual relations between a father and his daughter or son, since his own children would be considered to be his belongings, and of course he cannot steal from himself (Fortune, *Sexual Violence*, p.55). She identifies the same view of women as possessions (and raped women as stolen goods) in Deuteronomy 22:23-27, and also points out that in the narratives of the rape of Dinah in Genesis 34 and the rape of the Levite's concubine in Judges 19, the crime is ultimately thought of as being a crime against the property of the men in the story (Fortune, *Sexual Violence*, pp.49-50).

The narrative that receives particular attention is that of the rape of Tamar in 2 Samuel 13.[18] Specifically with regards to the issue of ownership[19], Pamela Cooper-White, re-telling and examining the narrative, points out that before the rape Amnon addresses Tamar as "my sister", emphasising the relation between them. Afterwards, she becomes, "this woman", who he casts out of his presence, ordering his servant to bolt the door after her. Cooper-White writes, "The label *this woman* does not mean "this person" but rather "this property" (now used and to be discarded)."[20] Phyllis Trible's interpretation, in her book *Texts of Terror,* of the biblical narrative that gives the account of the rape of Tamar, at this stage in the narrative makes the point that when Amnon sends Tamar away he no longer speaks to her, but issues a command to others about what is to be done with her. Trible observes as the significance of this, "She has become for him solely a disposable object."[21] (Compare these observations to Sylvia Fraser's depiction of how she felt after her father attempted to rape her, "*She feels used, not as one person exploited by another, but as a condom is used then discarded in the gutter.*"[22])

This sudden and violent shift from a person in relationship to a piece of property belonging to, used, and thrown away by an abuser is one place in which the way that abuse is spoken about can consciously connect with those texts that make up part of Christian tradition. As discussed already in this and in previous chapters, the terms a Christian community uses to interpret and understand the impact and meaning of child sexual abuse (if indeed it seeks to understand these things at all) influences the manner and extent to which a person who has been sexually abused can belong in that community. If her experiences are interpreted using the language of that community, then those experiences seem more definitely to belong in a community than if they are interpreted using a language developed outside that community. Placed in the context of these thoughts about abuse and ownership, the importance of belonging in Christian communities becomes all more obvious. Parker and Fraser both express the theft of their environments, and the claiming of those environments as possessions of the abuser. The way that they describe the abuser laying claim to the environment of the abused child

[18] This story forms the basis of Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar*, as well as being explored in Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror* (London: SCM Press, 2002), pp.25-44, Fortune, *Sexual Violence*, pp.51-53.
[19] The narrative has significance beyond the issue of ownership, and will be looked at more fully in the following chapter.
[20] Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar*, p.24
[21] Trible, *Texts of Terror*, p.36
[22] Fraser, *My Father's House*, p.43

means that it no longer feels "her own" – it no longer feels a place to which she is appropriately connected. If a Christian community is to be a place in which she is appropriately connected, that community needs to recognise the significance of her experiences as experiences that truly speak into and belong in that community, and not insist on those experiences' being kept silent or being spoken in a language that sets them apart from the community.

In looking at this aspect of the term possession as it relates to ownership of one person by another, it is possible to begin to see how the reported experiences of women who say they felt reduced to the property of their abusers are experiences that speak into and among a Christian tradition. They speak into a tradition that incorporates accounts and attitudes according to which women have been regarded as the property of men. More specifically, the voices of abused women who report this perception have the potential to speak into what is a gaping hole in scriptures that record stories of sexually abused women who are bought, sold, traded and stolen, but whose own perspectives on these transactions are almost never known.[23]

The notion of an abused woman's being owned by her abuser in the sense of the child's body being claimed and set apart for the use and purposes of the abuser also contains distorted echoes of the Christian believer's belonging to God, set apart for God's purposes and service. Silverman characterises her relationship with her abuser in these terms, connecting his ownership of her with her service to him, "She has no need to see what's done to her body because it's not hers. She is not the one who owns it; he does…Her role is to serve him, to fulfil any need or desire that he might have."[24] This is an issue I will return to in the conclusion to this chapter, but the suggestion of the abuser as having taken on the role of God in relation to the child is one that is significant throughout this exploration of the different aspects of possession, and is developed further in the following section on idolatry.

[23] In this way, these voices could carry out at ground level in communities the kind of task performed in the approaches of feminist scholars who in the interpretation of biblical narratives retrieve lost, neglected, or silenced voices of women. Eg. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992); Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar*; Trible, *Texts of Terror*.
[24] Sue William Silverman, *Because I Remember Terror, Father, I Remember You* (Athens, GA.; London, 1996), p.93

2. Possession as inhabitation of the body

> [S]ometimes , in a total absence of worldly sound, in a stillness as black as the night sky, I hear the faintest of pulses; no, it's not a sound, but I feel, yes, *feel* the faintest of pulses, beating. And the pulse is not mine.
>
> Sue William Silverman[25]

All three of the authors whose accounts were presented in the previous chapter convey that one impact of the abuse was their perception of a lasting presence inside them that they connected to the abuser. All three use the word "haunted" to describe the impact of abuse in their lives. Ramsey, as stated in the previous chapter, describes the moment at which she realised that the lasting impact of rape was one of physical presence, stating, "The rape was not now only a memory but an actual presence. I held *him* in my belly."[26] This presence inside her body is at different points described as a "splinter" made of pain, disgust, and a kind of despair with life and the world. Similarly, in poetry Parker describes her feeling that her body carried something that her abuser had planted there, asking, "Has my body given birth to anything / Except what he planted as a crime?[27] Further, as discussed in chapter three, a narration of one of her dreams sees her attempting to extract a cord from inside her body, and as part of her healing she performs a ritual in which she draws her torso as containing an old penis which she cuts out and extracts from inside her body.

As shown in the previous chapter, Fraser's account contains especially vivid descriptions of this aspect of possession. She describes with powerful language and imagery her experience of being a "guilty body possessed by daddy"[28], and how she understands the mechanics of his possession of her body. Her book contains many memories of her being afraid of monsters and demons creeping into her body and taking root there, and her description of her dream of the abortion of "Satan's child" from inside her suggests that she continued to fear that these monsters or demons may have succeeded in sneaking into her body. This sense of bodily invasion and occupation is a significant part of how Fraser understands and uses the term possession in describing her own experiences.

---

[25] Silverman, *Because I Remember Terror, Father, I Remember You*, p.94
[26] Ramsey, *Where I Stopped*, p.34
[27] Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes*, pp.174-175
[28] Fraser, *My Father's House*, p.221

This aspect of possession as a forced breaching of the body's boundaries, resulting in the physical incorporation of a foreign presence, is an important part of how spirit or demon possession is understood. For example, historian Nancy Caciola, in her study on understandings of spirit possession going back to the middle ages, discusses the process of discerning whether a person appearing to be possessed might be possessed by a good or an evil spirit. The outward symptoms, and the contemporary understandings of the inner mechanics, were similar in both types of possession. Those said to be possessed by either divine or demonic forces were "viewed as having incorporated foreign spirits into the body."[29] This does resonate with how possession is understood in both Parker's and Fraser's accounts, especially Fraser's, but what resonates most strongly is Caciola's characterisation of understandings of demon possession as "an intimate – and violent – invasion of the body."[30]

Caciola, draws attention to the fact that exorcism rites would emphasise the purification of each body part,

> Holy Lord Father Omnipotent, eternal God, expel the devil from this person: from the head, from the hair and crown of the head, from the brain, from the forehead, from the eyes, from the ears, from the nostrils, from the mouth, from the tongue, from under the tongue, from the throat, from the neck, from the chest, from the heart, from the whole body, from all its members, from all its ancillary members inside and outside, from the bones and nerves, from the blood…from the stomach/womb, from the intestines, from the flesh, from the feet, from the tendons, from the heels, from the whole group of body parts."[31]

Caciola interprets this as the rite of effectively, "reclaiming the physical territory of the demoniac body, bit by contested bit."[32] Appreciating these traditional understandings of possession adds to the use of this terminology for describing part of the experience of sexual abuse.

This emphasis on expulsion of spirits from the body in exorcism rites outlined above, as well as pointing to issues of ownership over the body, is also indicative of the view of the "physically incorporative character of demonic possession."[33] An exorcism, as well as being a reclaiming of territory, also served the function of a removal of an indwelling agent from the possessed person's body, as Caciola states, "This momentum

[29] Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*, p.24
[30] Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*, p.53
[31] Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*, pp.256-257
[32] Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*, p.256
[33] Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*, p.26

toward the body highlights the degree to which demonic possession was understood as a physical invasion and disordering of the body's individual members."[34]

The idea of possession as physically incorporative opens up different possibilities for interpreting the observation frequently made in literature on child sexual abuse, that a person who has been abused perceives herself to be polluted by what has happened. Hilary Cashman writes, "Sexual abuse in childhood gives rise to feelings of powerlessness, worthlessness and contamination which persist into adulthood."[35] Jeanette Gosney likewise observes, "Survivors feel polluted…Survivors 'behold' themselves as dirty."[36] It is less common to find reflection on why people who have been sexually abused might feel contaminated or polluted, or what it might be that they feel contaminated or polluted *with*.

This aspect of the image of possession – possession as a physical incorporation of an invading agent – is one way of understanding a woman's reported perception of contamination after having been sexually abused. Nancy Gager and Cathleen Schurr suggest that a rape victim's feeling of being unclean, and their compulsion to wash, could be said to result from the "need to wash away the knowledge that one's body has been invaded and brutalized by another."[37] Parker explains that, in the middle of what she describes as a "fight" with her abuser, decades after the abused had taken place, "It was no longer clear to me whether I was fighting Frank or fighting myself. The abuser was inside me."[38]

The ways in which a person who has been sexually abused might think about her outward appearance, or the ways she thinks of her behaviour, also resonate with the physically incorporative aspect of possession. Caciola discusses how according to traditional understandings of spirit possession, the indwelling spirit was considered to be

---

[34] Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*, p.258
[35] Hilary Cashman, *Christianity and Child Sexual Abuse* (London: SPCK, 1993), p.21
[36] Jeanette Gosney, *Surviving Childhood Sexual Abuse: Supporting Adults in the Church* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2002), p.17. Both this citation and the one previous to it involves a generalising of the experience of child sexual abuse that it is not my intention to suggest is justified. However, the ideas these authors express are helpful in thinking about perceptions of contamination and pollution as impacts that can follow from childhood sexual abuse.
[37] Nancy Gager and Cathleen Schurr, *Sexual Assault: Confronting Rape in America*, (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1976), p.85, cited in Mary D. Pellauer, "A Theological Perspective on Sexual Assault" in Mary D. Pellauer, Barbara Chester and Jane Boyajian (eds.), *Sexual Assault and Abuse: A Handbook for Clergy and Religious Professionals* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), p.88
[38] Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes*, p.203

manifested in the body of the possessed person by outward physical signs in the form of changes in the physical appearance of the surface of the body and in the form of altered behaviour that suggested a foreign agent held control over the individual.[39] Demon possessed people were considered to be more prone to changes in physical appearance, including "acquisition of unusual marks on the surface of the skin, bloating or levitation."[40] These outward physical signs pointed to the interior state of the person possessed, "This inscription or remolding of the body was constructed as an external signifier of the victim's internal, spiritual violation."[41]

A similar relationship between the interior invasion and the exterior surface of the body can be observed in the accounts of people who have been sexually abused. Silverman repeatedly returns to the subject of the internal nature of the violation of sexual abuse and refers to "the evil that lives inside me."[42] She presents one of the consequences as her perceiving a signifying mark of this violation on the surface of her body, stating, "I feel as if my body is tattooed in men's fingerprints."[43] Likewise, Carolyn Holderread Heggen, writes of her experiences of working with women who have been sexually abused, "Many tell of feeling as though they had an indelible mark on their forehead which made it easy for everyone to look at them and know what was happening."[44]

The behaviour of a possessed person could also be understood as a manifestation of the agency of the possessing spirit located inside her body. Caciola points out that the scriptural precedent, which is followed in a number of paintings depicting demon possession, is to represent "the demoniac as invaded by a foreign presence that…provokes subhuman, uncivilized behavior."[45] Fraser, in the context of an account that frequently re-emphasises her persisting sense that her abuser was inside her body, gives descriptions of ways in which she behaved towards other people around her which she subsequently interpreted as her father's "voice" errupting out of her body. Giving an account of one incident of her raging at her husband, her way of presenting it brings in

[39] Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*, pp.40-54
[40] Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*, pp.46-47
[41] Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*, p.45
[42] Silverman, *Because I Remember Terror, Father, I Remember You*, p.183
[43] Silverman, *Because I Remember Terror, Father, I Remember You*, p.190
[44] Carolyn Holderread Heggen, *Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes and Churches* (Scottdale, PA.; Waterloo, Ontario: Herald Press, 1993), p.32
[45] Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*, p.40

the language of demons, and associates her words and her rage with her father's behaviour,

> Words spill out of my mouth – ugly, hysterical, accusing. His jaw is clenched, his hands grip the steering wheel. He's never heard such rage, like a demon vomiting green bile. Neither have I – not outside my father's house. While I cringe in humiliation, somewhere inside me a voice I can't stop spews abuse from my lips. It's a voice I recognize all too well – the same petulance, the same indignant demand for service.[46]

These descriptions of possession as the location of the abuser inside the body, and as the inscription of this on the surface of the body, both potentially shed a very different light on self harming behaviour in women who have been abused, against those understandings shaped by the dominant clinical discourse on this behaviour. If the sense of invasion and violation is understood as a breaching of bodily boundaries and the subsequent inhabitation of body by the presence of the abuser, then it does not seem strange that a person experiencing this may try to find ways to reverse it by creating exit points out of which to expel this presence. When Parker writes of her realisation that the abuser was "inside" her, this is situated in the context of her descriptions of self harm. One woman, cited by Heggen, says, "I felt like my body was filled with something dark and rotten. I thought if I cut myself, perhaps the putrid vileness would pour out and I would feel less evil."[47] Likewise, Silverman, writing about her own self harm as related to the impact of sexual abuse, writes, "I believe my blood is this evil and he, *he* is the one who owns the blood. I must drain it from my body…It is my belief that blood calms, that after I cut myself, after I drain evil from my body, I am better."[48]

The suggestion is then that self harm may be understood as functioning as the releasing of a possessing agent – an abuser who has violently invaded and inhabited the body. Its function is more akin to an attempt at exorcism than to a psychological coping method, and as such is more relevant to the concerns of the Christian community than those communities might like to think.

The issue of the inscription of spirit possession on the surface of the body is also interesting to consider in relation to self harm. Changes to the body's appearance, including marks on the surface of the skin, understood as "an external signifier of the

[46] Fraser, *My Father's House*, p.114
[47] Heggen, *Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes and Churches*, p.36
[48] Silverman, *Because I Remember Terror, Father, I Remember You*, p.196, italics in original.

victim's internal, spiritual violation"[49], could also be viewed as signifiers of the violation and possession of a child by her abuser. This connects back to the thoughts on self-mutilation, explored in the previous chapter as a "voice on the skin". As a surface inscription of an inner incorporation of an abuser, self harm could communicate the abusive events that have occurred, and the significance of these events for the inner integrity of the woman who has been abused.

Placing these women's descriptions of feeling possessed by their abusers in the sense of bodily/physical incorporation, alongside descriptions of how spirit possession has been understood, helps in constructing an understanding of the experience of childhood sexual abuse that accounts for particular features of the experience that is being reported. It helps to give a particular kind of account of these women's reports of the bodily nature of their experience of being possessed by their abusers; namely, his ownership of her as a very physical ownership, his lingering presence inside her body, and the outward signifying of this through the conduct and/or appearance of the body.

3. Possession as the disruption of the self

The two previous sections emphasised distinct yet connected aspects of the corporeal nature of possession – as an ownership of the abused child's body for the abuser's use, and as a physical invasion and occupation by the abuser. These two sections also emphasised the extent of the abuser's lasting control and power over the child, and the relationship of this power to his ownership of her. In this section, I will consider what the implication of this might be, or what the experience of being invaded, occupied and controlled by another person, might amount to. One woman interviewed by Imbens and Jonkers, is quoted as stating, "my father took possession of me, raped my body, my emotions, and spirit."[50] This section turns to deal with the question of what this kind of statement might mean; what it means to talk about being raped in body, emotions, and spirit, and how this relates to possession.

[49] Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*, p.45
[50] "Joan", cited in Imbens and Jonker, *Christianity and Incest*, p.37

Pamela Cooper-White writes, "The spiritual wounds of sexual abuse are deep, as deep as the most secret, protected core of the person, as deep as her soul."[51] The third of the definitions of possession listed at the beginning of this section explains possession as the "Domination of a person's heart, mind, or soul by a person or other agent." An experience of possession may carry not only the threat of losing ownership and control of one's body, but also descriptions of spirit possession and descriptions of the aftermath of sexual abuse make reference to the threat to the soul of the possessed/abused person.

Experiences of child sexual abuse have been described as being, in part, a theft or a death of the abused person's soul. Hilary Cashman's book *Christianity and Child Sexual Abuse* opens with a citation from woman who had been sexually abused, and had described her experience as "soul-murder."[52] Silverman, considering her father's motivation for sexually abusing her, asks the question, "*But, Daddy, I want to ask you, I want to know, did you think you'd reclaim your own soul by secretly stealing another?*"[53]

The use of the term "soul" here is I think best understood as pointing to the essential self of the woman who has been abused. In these descriptions of wounding, of murder, of stealing, the use of the term "soul" indicates that what is wounded, murdered, and stolen is the very core of who a person is; it is the wounding, murder and theft of that which the person associates at a deep level with being who they perceive themselves to be.

Turning to look at possession literature, Hilaire Kallendorf, in her book *Exorcism and its Texts*, writes, "Demons were a threat to the self in that they were believed by some to have the ability to take over a person's identity – body, mind and soul."[54] Caciola says that as spirits enter the possessed person's body, the person's "human identity" is subverted to that of the possessing spirit, in such a way that the human identity is "disrupted."[55] Describing the trance state observed in spirit possession, she describes how the possessed person's spirit would be either driven out of her body, or driven deeply inside so it no longer seemed to be present,

---

[51] Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar*, p.167
[52] Cashman, *Christianity and Child Sexual Abuse*, p.1
[53] Silverman, *Because I Remember Terror, Father, I Remember You*, p206
[54] Hilaire Kallendorf, *Exorcism and its Texts: Subjectivity in Early Modern Literatures of England and Spain*, (Toronto; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2003), p.xiiv
[55] Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*, p.54

> Either the woman's spirit would leave her body entirely and visit supernatural realms, or it would recede into her deepest depths, relying only on her 'interior senses'…so completely immobilizing was the trance state thought to be, it often was likened to a temporary death.[56]

This aspect of experiences of spirit possession as involving the spirit leaving the body resonates with accounts of experiences during acts of childhood abuse. For example, Silverman writes of her experience during one act of abuse, "I begin to feel myself disperse. I am the steam. Each molecule of my body vaporizes into transparent beads of mist.[57] Her choice of the word "disperse", and the image of herself as vaporizing, convey a sense of herself as being broken up into pieces, but in a way such that the individual pieces could not even be discerned, but seem to be melting away. At another point, she says explicitly that the abuse resulted in there being nothing that she could call "me": "inside my bedroom my father fucks me – until there is no longer a me. For it's not true that a body is needed, like a jar, to contain everything inside it. There is a stain on the sheet that is an essence of me, but there is no tangible me."[58]

This loss of a "me" in the intensity of a relationship of possession can be understood as having social aspects as well as just an 'internal' sense of a loss of self as an abuser invades. All of the accounts presented in the previous chapter stressed the damage that the abuser caused to other relationships, compromising her connections to family and friends. Cathy Winkler, an anthropologist who has published work stemming from her own experience of rape, describes rape as "social murder." [59] If a person's sense of who she is is intertwined with her connections to other people, then this sense of who she is is significantly damaged by the severing of these ties.

Looking at this through the lens of the idea of possession, this idea of the disruption of self as a disruption of social connections can be thought of in ways that connect this with the invasion and control exercised by a possessing agency. Bruce Kapferer, for example, examining the social context and impact of demonic possession, regards "selves" as being "activated in social intercourse", which is interrupted by demon possession. He writes, "There is a lessening of the interpenetration of the Self as socially constituted with the social Other. The objective 'me' is sustained not by the interaction

[56] Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*, p.64
[57] Silverman, *Because I Remember Terror, Father, I Remember You*, p.142
[58] Silverman, *Because I Remember Terror, Father, I Remember You*, p.114
[59] Cathy Winkler, "Rape as Social Murder", *Anthropology Today* 7, no. 3 (June 1991), pp.12-14

of the 'I' with the Other but by the interaction of the 'I' with demons."[60] The relation between the possessed person and the possessing demon is of such intensity that it eclipses all other relations.

The way that abuser-child relationships have been described depicts this relationship in a comparable way. As mentioned in chapter three, Parker says of her bond with her abuser, "Something in me responded to the emotional intensity and the attention. I became deeply attached to Frank and didn't want to be separated from him."[61] The nature of this though was such that it became the one thing that she actually believed to be real. In the context of thinking about the possibility of being in positive relationships, Parker writes of her realising the nature of the bond she had to the abuser, and the way that this made other relationships at that point impossible, saying, "I only *really believed* in Frank."[62]

In looking at the term "possession" as it is used in accounts of child sexual abuse, and drawing on its use and understanding in literature on spirit and demon possession, it has been possible to reflect on how the word 'possession' might help to convey a sense of invasion, occupation and ownership of the body that might be felt and reported by women who have been abused. Taking the concept of possession as a lens through which to consider in turn the three areas of ownership, bodily inhabitation, and disruption of identity, has opened up new possibilities for interpreting these experiences. In this third section, thinking about the term 'possession' has also helped to clarify how a person who has been abused might feel her sense of who she is to have been subverted or pulled apart, and redefined by her abuser. Paula Standford suggests that this attack on who the abused woman's sense of self is in fact an attack and a reorientation on her creaturehood in relation to a loving creator God. As Standford puts it, "Her sense of who she was created to be…has been battered, torn and twisted at root level."[63] This is a thought that will be taken into the next section, in looking at the theological significance of child sexual abuse as the destruction of God's intentions for each of God's children, as the abuser takes on the role of God to the child.

---

[60] Bruce Kapferer, "Mind, Self and Other in Demonic Illness", *American Ethnologist* 6, no. 1 (February 1979), p.117
[61] Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes*, p.190
[62] Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes*, p.196
[63] Paula Sandford, *Healing Victims of Sexual Abuse* (Hatfield: Van Schaik, 2000), p.20

Idolatry

> This was the force of the abuser in my life. He occupied the place of God. It was his presence, his will, his actions that ruled my life. I had no other god before him. My spirit bowed down to him. I accepted that I was who he said I was. His spirit filled my life. I began to think of my struggle as a struggle with idolatry.
>
> Rebecca Parker[64]

Understanding idolatry

Parts of the three accounts presented in the previous chapter, along with other accounts of sexual abuse, describe the extent of the abuser's power and the nature of this power in ways that are interesting to revisit and re-examine in the light of Parker's naming one of the impacts of abuse as idolatry. In this section I will look at the term 'idolatry' as a way of understanding a relationship between abuser and child, the expectations placed on a child, the attitudes of a child towards an abuser, and the impact all this might have on an abused person's other relationships. The purpose of doing so, as in the previous work on possession, is to locate a space in Christian communities for these experiences to belong by articulating and interpreting them in language that already has a place of belonging in these communities.

I am understanding the term idolatry here to mean the worship of something that has come to take on the place of God, so that a person behaves towards this thing (idol) as if it were God. This incorporates the positioning of the idol so that it occupies the position and has the status of God to a person. Parker's description above of her own attitude towards her abuser – the status and power he held in relation to her – is presented as reflecting this dynamic.

The same dynamic can also be seen in accounts of other women sexually abused as children. One interviewee in Imbens and Jonker's book on the experiences of Christian women abused by family members describes her abuser (her father) in a way that resonates with the understanding of an idol. She states, "He sat there like God the

[64] Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes*, p.195

Father. He wanted to be worshipped himself. We had to pray to him."[65] Another woman quoted in the same book also presents her abuser as situated and functioning in a God-like role within the family, stating, "He was like a god, an idol; I wanted to be in his favor."[66] She builds on this image to express the considerable, even supernatural, power that her abuser was seen to have, compelling her to fulfil his demands, "I idolized him, but it was difficult to fulfill a god's desires and demands. His eyes could make you do things."[67]

Parker's use of the term 'idolatry' incorporates the sense of the abuser being established in the position of God in relation to her, and of her attitude towards him being one of worship. In this part of the chapter I will look at aspects of the experience of child sexual abuse that may be significant in creating a context in which the abuser-child relationship may result in a situation that can be described as idolatrous, shaping the dynamic of the relationship and the outworking of this dynamic. I will divide this into two sections: in the first section I will look at how faith and trust may be impacted in such a way that it becomes easy for the abuser to take on the role of God. In the second section I will outline one way in which the abuser-child relationship can be thought of as idolatrous, discussing this relationship in terms of creator and creature. I will also think about how an idolatrous relationship works itself out in practice, looking at how the child's role in relation to the abuser can be interpreted in terms of a particular kind of service.

In a third section I will then look from a different angle at the relation of the term idolatry to the context of child sexual abuse, and think about how the role that the child is forced into resembles that of a sacrifice. Understanding sacrifice to be an aspect of worship, I will consider the concealing of child sexual abuse, and the unwillingness to accept its reality and to seek justice for its victims, as a form of idolatry – one in which children are "sacrificed" to an "idol" of the image of church or family. This issue of the "sacrifice" of children will be the third way that I discuss the issue of idolatry in relation to child sexual abuse.

[65] "Joan", cited in Imbens and Jonker, *Christianity and Incest*, p.35
[66] "Carol", cited in Imbens and Jonker, *Christianity and Incest*, p.84
[67] "Carol", cited in Imbens and Jonker, *Christianity and Incest*, p.84

Faith and trust

An undermining and disordering of faith and trust is something that may be acknowledged in its own right as a devastating impact of child sexual abuse. Christian literature on child sexual abuse frequently addresses the issue of the abused child's loss of faith or trust in God. This may be presented in terms of a sense of betrayal by a God who did not intervene or protect (according to a particular understanding of protection). For example, Patrick Parkinson writes, "For many abused children, God is the God who was not there, the God who remained silent through all their tears and cries for help and protection."[68] The loss of faith may also be presented in terms of a loss of faith or trust in those people to whom a child had previously looked to for protection.

Constructed out of the observations and claims of literature that explores the impact of abuse on the victim's faith and trust, in this section I will explore this undermining of faith and trust as a context within which a certain kind of bond with the abuser may develop, and I will then go on to discuss this bond in terms of idolatry. My suggestion is that the intensity of this relationship could be understood as a consequence of the child's faith in her abuser over and above her faith in anything else.

In her book, *Aftermath*, written out of her experience of rape and attempted murder, Susan Brison refers to Jean Améry's statement that a person who is tortured is forced to abandon the belief that other people "will respect my physical, and with it also my metaphysical being…At the first blow…trust in the world breaks down."[69] After such an experience, she argues, the victim may be left distrustful, suspicious and wary of the world and the people in it; the world changes from being a (more or less) safe place, to being a venue for abuse, and the people in it become people who are likely to inflict pain, or who are likely to ignore pain that is inflicted.

Judith Lewis Herman, discussing the ways in which "traumatic events" impact the relationships of a victim, argues that in a situation that is terrifying for the victim, she feels completely abandoned, and all relationship bonds are called into question. Continuing from the passage quoted at the beginning of this section, Herman writes,

---

[68] Patrick Parkinson, *Child Sexual Abuse and the Churches* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1997), p.144

[69] Jean Améry, "Torture" in Lawrence Langer (ed.), *Art from the Ashes: A Holocaust Anthology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p.126, cited in Susan Brison, *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* (Princeton, N.J.; Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2003), p.46

> In situations of terror, people spontaneously seek their first source of comfort and protection. Wounded soldiers and raped women cry for their mothers, or for God. When this cry is not answered, the sense of basic trust is shattered. Traumatized people feel utterly abandoned, utterly alone, cast out of the human and divine systems of care and protection that sustain life. Thereafter, a sense of alienation, of disconnection, pervades every relationship, from the most intimate familial bonds to the most abstract affiliations of community and religion. When trust is lost, traumatized people feel that they belong more to the dead than to the living.[70]

Thinking of this effect of disconnection as one that pervades *every relationship*, as Herman puts it, is one way of interpreting this sense of abandonment. Herman's statement that people who have been traumatised feel "utterly abandoned" and "cast out of the human and divine systems of care and protection" resonates with Fraser's memory of her own feelings of having to persevere "*through the dark nights, forsaken by all the world and cursed by the holy angels of God*."[71] Sandford also portrays the aftermath of child sexual abuse as involving this sense of complete abandonment and alienation in relationships. Writing specifically about girls who have been sexually abused, she states, "She was not kept from the experience either by her parents or by Father God. As far as she is concerned, she was **abandoned** in her time of need, and she feels completely **alone in her pain**."[72]

Herman's description of the situation of the "traumatized person" as feeling "utterly abandoned, utterly alone" and disconnected from every relationship is helpful in understanding the context that likely surrounds a sexually abused child, but it may need to be nuanced in this particular case of trauma. In this context, it seems that the child is not alienated from *every* relationship; rather, it is in this situation of isolation that the child is forced to live in very close relationship with the abuser. It may be helpful to think about this characterisation of the situation as one of feeling "completely alone" as the circumstances in which one relationship develops; the development of this relationship and the disconnection from all others are mutually reinforcing. To have just one relationship developing in a situation of otherwise isolation and abandonment may be thought of as part of what accounts for the nature that that relationship can take on.

---

[70] Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (London: Pandora, 2001), p.52
[71] Fraser, *My Father's House*, p.105
[72] Sandford, *Healing Victims of Sexual Abuse*, p.17. Emphasis in the original.

Having named her struggle as a "struggle with idolatry", and having come to think of her relationship with her abuser as an "unholy alliance", Parker wonders what kind of relationship she would need in order to overcome this "idolatrous" relationship,

> To be free from idolatry would require a different relationship at the core of my life – a relationship that wasn't one of possession, obedience, and terror; a relationship in which I did not bow down to the demands of self-abnegation and the dictates of fear. The 'Thou' I needed was more than the 'Thou' before whom no secret was hid. It was also the 'Thou' before whom no self-destructive service was required – a 'Thou' of mercy and freedom. I had to face that at the core of my being I did not believe such mercy or such freedom existed. I only *really believed* in Frank.[73]

There is a sense communicated here and in other accounts of childhood sexual abuse that there is something about the interaction with the abuser in an act and relationship that is sexually abusive that is in a sense too real. It is true that the issue of secrecy and shame have a huge part to play in a child feeling abandoned and alone and disconnected from other relationships, but there is also something more than this – that childhood sexual abuse is such an extreme interaction with another person that it eclipses all others.

This idea of one relationship being much more real, more vivid, more intense, than all others comes across in the way in which Fraser writes about her feelings towards her father, in comparison to the way she writes about her feelings towards other people. In the first case, she uses extreme terms, alternating, often within the same sentence, between expressing love and hate for her father,

> My daddy is pulling my body over him like mommy pulls a holey sock over a darning egg. Filthy filthy don't ever let me catch you shame shame filthy daddy won't love me love me dirty filthy love him hate him fear don't ever let me catch you catch you dirty dirty love hate guilt shame fear fear *fear fear fear fear fear fear…*[74]

The depth of desperation that is portrayed in Fraser's need for her father to love is clear when she repeatedly describes how she would force herself to tolerate his abuse of her, believing that doing so would secure the love that she presents as absolutely essential for her, "*I'm afraid to complain because daddy won't love me won't love me love me.*"; "*I hold my breath to keep from crying because daddy won't love me love me love me.*"[75] When she writes about relationships with other family members, or with friends, the tone

[73] Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes*, p.195-196
[74] Fraser, *My Father's House*, p.220-221
[75] Fraser, *My Father's House*, pp.10; 11

is very different. With the exception of sexual relationships, there is none of this intensity; her connections to other people are often portrayed as abstract concepts rather than real experiences, or other people are described as being there, but just out of reach.

An analogy that might help to make this understanding of the experience clearer is to imagine a person standing in a room with several people, and one man is standing with his face just a couple of inches away. Even if there was no one else in the room, he would be too close. His being so close while other people are in the room means the person cannot really see or interact with the other people properly. They might know the other people are there, but cannot really connect with them while he is so close. A relationship with an abuser can be thought of as functioning similarly, and with similar effects. There is something about an abuser being *that* close and *that* involved that makes the relationship with him just too much, too real. No other relationship could ever be as real as that because no one else could (or should) ever be that close in that way. And so an abused child may end up cut off from everyone else and totally overwhelmed by this one relationship, which then becomes even closer and more intense because it is the only real one the child has.

The experience of abuse may, as Parker describes, lead to a positioning of the abuser as the highest belief in the life of an abused child, or as the most real thing to her, in part because being abused may undermine the perceived reality of God and of everyone and everything else. This relationship, experienced in this way, throws the child into a situation where she is forced to deny real relationship with community or with God. As one woman says of the impact of childhood sexual abuse, "God became untrustworthy and Jesus was like someone out of a fairy tale."[76]

I suggest this as a context in which may develop what can then be thought of as an idolatrous relationship with the abuser. In the next section I will work through one way in which such a relationship could be understood.

[76] "Joan", cited in Imbens and Jonker, *Christianity and Incest*, p.39

Destruction and recreation of a person

> [T]he terror and shock had opened a raw place in my mind where anything could lodge. In that moment I gave him complete authority over my mind and my imagination.
>
> Martha Ramsey[77]

In the third stage of my unpacking the term possession as a way of interpreting and understanding a relationship between child and abuser, I explored how the terminology of possession could be one way into thinking about a child's experience of the destruction of who she is. I cited one text on child sexual abuse as phrasing this destruction as, "Her sense of who she was created to be…has been battered, torn and twisted at root level."[78] It is this idea of the destruction of the creature-creator relationship that leads into this section. After looking at how this can be understood as happening through the impact of childhood sexual abuse, I will then suggest that one way of interpreting the dynamic in an abusive relationship is to think of this dynamic in terms of creator and creature. This is a specific way in which the relationship can be understood in terms of idolatry - firstly as the "destruction" of the child as a creation intended to be in loving relationship, and secondly as the "new creation" of the child as the abuser's creature, created to serve his demands.

a) Destruction of creation

The way that I propose to understand destruction here is in terms of the destruction of connection. Accounts of childhood sexual abuse may describe events and experiences that suggest a destruction of connection for the child – with her own body, and in her relationships. Alongside this is a sense of the destruction of relationships – both with people and communities, and with objects and physical environments.

Looking first at the destruction of connection with the child's body, this experience is described by Ramsey's use of the very concise phrase "disembodied

[77] Ramsey, *Where I Stopped*, p.76
[78] Sandford, *Healing Victims of Sexual Abuse*, p.20

piercing"[79] to describe how she experienced rape. A similar idea of being disembodied is conveyed by Fraser's remark "Everything about my body seems strange, as if it were not really part of me."[80] She describes losing the feeling in her body, so that she could burn and scald herself and feel nothing.

Silverman at one point describes feeling her body turn to "granite" as her father abuses her, and she loses all physical sensation, "I see what he does to his slut daughter, before her body turns to granite. I feel nothing. There is nothing to feel. Perhaps splinters of granite chip from her skin as I see him cut her there, moments before he fucks her."[81] As mentioned above, Silverman's also describes feeling her body dissolving and floating apart in a way that she compares to mist or steam – "I begin to feel myself disperse. I am the steam. Each molecule of my body vaporizes into transparent beads of mist."[82] Ramsey also describes becoming gradually more numb and distant as she was being raped, using the word "gelatinlike" to characterise this feeling, and saying that her voice sounded to her as if it were coming from somewhere far away.[83]

In these accounts, the experience of feeling detached from their bodies is described as occurring in specific ways during the abuse, and then often continuing as a way of life long after the abuse has ended. Living above, out of, or not quite fully associated with, their bodies becomes a way that life is lived and experienced; selves that are persistently disembodied and struggling to be located in or identified with their bodies.

As well as this destruction of connection with the individual physical body, there is also a destruction of connection that can be understood as the breaking of connection with the social body. Each of the accounts presented in the previous chapter conveys a strong sense of the social isolation felt by the women who were sexually abused. Parker writes of the way that the abuse separated her from family relationships, as the abuser frightened her into a silence compounded by her growing up in an environment in which

[79] Ramsey, *Where I Stopped*, p.27
[80] Fraser, *My Father's House*, p.74
[81] Silverman, *Because I Remember Terror, Father, I Remember You*, p.140
[82] Silverman, *Because I Remember Terror, Father, I Remember You*, p.142
[83] Ramsey, *Where I Stopped*, p.28

suffering was seen as something to be borne quietly.[84] Ramsey also describes feeling separated from the people around her because of the impossibility of communicating her experience of the rape.[85]

Likewise, Fraser describes living in a way in which she felt removed from relationships with her friends, which she experienced as a performance, and in a way in which she felt terrified by the prospect of any sexual relationship. Even those relationships that she recognised could be positive, she remembers herself avoiding, not knowing how to form or maintain those kinds of connections. She explains, "Even now, I can't trust. Even now, I dare not trust."[86] The result is characterised as complete isolation – in her words, "*forsaken by all the world*."[87]

Ramsey takes this further, describing the impact of rape as not just a severing of relationships with other people, but also with objects and environments around her which had previously felt familiar. Towards the end of the book, as she writes of starting to regain a sense of connection, she recalls, "Neither the person closest to me nor the trees and sea I loved had felt real or had touched me for a long time"[88]

Parker's account also conveys this sense of a severing of connection to the world around her, which she associates with her being made into something other than a person, and being made absent. Thinking about a walk she took, as an adult, to a nearby lake, she describes the beauty of the scene alongside her inability to be touched by this in any way. She writes,

> Our house in Oakland was near Lake Merritt. One Saturday morning, a rare weekend when I was alone without work obligations, I walked to the lake. It was a pristine midwinter California morning. The sky was brilliantly clear. The air, cool. The sun, bright. The water was still as glass. Through the dark oaks, I looked across the mirror of water to Our Lady of Lourdes, an art deco church – white, blue and pink, its steeple rising into the sky. Behind it the Oakland hills rose, green and smoky blue. I stared blankly at the scene before my eyes. I noticed that I felt nothing. Nothing about the beauty before me inspired even a flicker of pleasure, resonance, or appreciation. I felt like a zombie, a person made of cardboard. A cold fire. I had become an absence. The thought came to me, "I

[84] Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes*, p.189
[85] Ramsey, *Where I Stopped*, p.234
[86] Fraser, *My Father's House*, p.113
[87] Fraser, *My Father's House*, p.105
[88] Ramsey, *Where I Stopped*, p.234

> cannot bear the beauty of the world." And then, "Something is wrong with my soul. I am in trouble. I need help."[89]

While these accounts may suggest an expulsion of the child's identity from her body, they may also suggest more than that; not just that the child's identity is exiled from her body, but that the child's identity is destroyed (before being redefined). Silverman describes her part of the impact of her father's sexual abuse of her as marking at a particular point of her childhood (around the age of ten) the end of her own existence as she experiences it. The fact that at this point she had no language with which to name her experience and place it in relation to any other experience or person, led her to question what and who might be said to exist. She later explains,

> I learn no words for what I know, for what I am taught at night. So if words don't exist, if definitions don't exist, if signs and symbols don't exist, then maybe people and actions don't exist either. None of us exists. Night doesn't exist. Bodies don't exist. I don't exist, for surely I have no language that might prove otherwise.[90]

Her struggle with existence culminates in her entering what she describes as a "sleep", which lasts for three months, during which time she was largely unconscious. She interprets this as a resignation of her own existence, "Finally, by summer, I no longer believe in my existence and believe I am disappearing, deep inside sleep.[91] This resonates with the title of Martha Ramsey's book *Where I Stopped*, which conveys the idea of the rape as a point at which she simply ceased to be – an absolute death of existence.

b) A new creation

Having articulated in these terms the brokenness that may be caused to an abused child's connections within herself and with community and environment, and having looked at how she might cease to experience herself as a whole person living genuinely in a community to which she belongs, the question then arises as to what she becomes instead. A child may be broken off from connections to her body, from connections to her friends and family, from connections with the wider world. As explored in the section on possession, the relationship with her abuser may be such that she feels that she

[89] Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes*, p.170
[90] Silverman, *Because I Remember Terror, Father, I Remember You*, p.54
[91] Silverman, *Because I Remember Terror, Father, I Remember You*, p.76

belongs to him, he dwells inside her, that he has overwhelming power over who she understands herself to be and for what purpose she understands herself to exist. At this stage, I suggest that this severing of connections and belonging, alongside the kind of connection that may be felt with the abuser, can be explored in terms of considering the abuser as having brought the child into being as his creation. There are two aspects to this creator-creature relationship that are relevant in this context – firstly the creation of a person as the bringing into existence of that person, and secondly the role of the creator in defining or shaping who his creature is. In the experience of abuse, the abuser can be understood as functioning in both these aspects of a creator role in relation to the child.

In terms of creation as the bringing into existence of a person, Fraser's account most explicitly presents experiences that can be considered in the light of this image. Fraser describes how one of her responses to her father's sexual abuse of her was to create a child whose role was to be abused by him, "*When the conflict caused by my sexual relationship with my father became too acute to bear, I created a secret accomplice for my daddy by splitting my personality in two.*"[92] The purpose that Fraser describes this "accomplice" as having is to live in a relationship of love with her father, "She loved my father, freeing me to hate him."[93]

This creation of a new personality is also part of Silverman's account. She describes her experience of becoming a specific personality who existed solely for her father's sexual desires. This person, who she calls Dina, comes into existence because of the requirements of the abusive relationship, and within that relationship she obediently does her father's will,

> With incomprehension, lost in his own rage, desperately needing just one part of my body more than he needs sanity or love, he begins to hurt me…unless…quickly, quickly I metamorphose. Quickly silky black hair whispers across my shoulders and quickly I offer him Dina. Dina, whose body supplicates, whose body desires. Dina, who will be his childlover forever, his nightdaughter...I give my daddy the gift of Dina. Dina. Dina. Never, even once, will she refuse.[94]

It is not unusual for accounts of one-off experiences of rape or sexual abuse to express a sense that the experience of rape or abuse marks a radical turning point in the

[92] Fraser, *My Father's House*, p.24
[93] Fraser, *My Father's House*, p.15
[94] Silverman, *Because I Remember Terror, Father, I Remember You*, p.52

life of the person who was abused, to such an extent that it is articulated in terms of life and death. Ramsey, thinking back to her feelings on the evening that she had been raped, writes, "I felt a terminal weariness, an imitation of death."[95] Although writing as women raped as adults, both Alice Sebold and Susan Brison's accounts communicate something similar. Sebold, writing about the day after her rape at the age of eighteen, states, "My life was over; my life had just begun."[96] Brison, also writing about the period just after her attack, writes, "I led a spectral existence, not quite sure whether I had died and the world went on without me, or whether I was alive but in a totally alien world...I felt as though I'd somehow outlived myself."[97] Likewise, in Ellen Bass and Louise Thornton's book *I Never Told Anyone*, one woman who had been sexually abused as a child is quoted as saying "Aside from the fear, confusion, and shame, the molestation was as if I'd passed through an enormous threshold, as big as birth."[98] Experimenting with the idea of the relationship of child and abuser as one of creature and creator is one way of moving towards an understanding of this feeling of re-birth as part of the impact of abuse.

Silverman specifically locates this feeling of a new birth as something effected by the acts of abuse themselves. Juxtaposing this with her description of her resignation of existence, describes how her father's abuse brings about a new life from this silent and unspeakable non-existence,

> My nose is stuffed with the words that can't leak from my eyes or mouth. I have trouble breathing. All I feel is an almost unconscious jolt as he rapes me back to life. And he will. Because with my father and me, what usually kills others, is what nourishes us with life.[99]

A similar idea is conveyed when Parker writes of being filled by the spirit of her abuser. She does so in the context of considering the abuser as having replaced God for her,

> This was the force of the abuser in my life. He occupied the place of God. It was his presence, his will, his actions that ruled my life. I had no other god before him. My spirit bowed down to him. I accepted that I was who he said I was. His spirit filled my life.[100]

---

[95] Ramsey, *Where I Stopped*, p.35
[96] Alice Sebold, *Lucky*, (London: Picador, 2002), p.41
[97] Brison, *Aftermath*, p.9
[98] Lillian Kelly, cited in Ellen Bass and Louise Thornton, *I Never Told Anyone* (New York; London: Harper and Row, 1983), p.197
[99] Silverman, *Because I Remember Terror, Father, I Remember You*, p.173
[100] Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes*, p.195

In Parker's eyes, the abuser has the power to control her life, to determine who she is, and it is his spirit guiding her. Another part of her story suggests that in thinking of the abused child as a creature of the abuser, we can think of her as having been created in his image. Several times she describes herself as a mirror image of the abuser, "I am the mirror/ Through which Frank becomes visible...My own face, I felt, was the mirror image of Frank's face somehow."[101]

In connection with the idea of herself as brought to life by her father's abuse, Silverman also suggests an understanding of herself as a creature that resembles her father. She understands her father (as a boy abused by his own mother) as having had his soul "stolen" by her, "I imagine he's a boy who first lost his soul by the time he was three and could never reclaim it, because, with all the rage I know that lives in his body, I suspect his mother must have stolen his soul again and again."[102] Regarding her father as a man without a soul, she also refers to herself as, "*the soulless body my father created*."[103] In considering who this creature might be, who she might resemble, who she might belong to, who she might exist to serve, the answers to all these questions can be seen to point back to the abuser in the role of creator.

Cathy Winkler's description of rape as an adult sees the rapist in a comparable way, arguing, "the rapist tried to completely define himself into my existence." She understands a rapist's attempt to define himself as at the same time an attempt to destroy the victim's existence in her own right,

> [R]apists' attempt to define their existence over and above the existence of their victims is an attempt to define victims out of existence. In regards to my identity, he penetrated my existence, physically tearing me up and battering my body."[104]

At the beginning of this half of the chapter, I identified as part of my understanding of idolatry, the positioning of the idol so that it occupies the position and has the status of God to a person. An abuser who is seen as creating his victim, bringing her into existence, is very much seen as having God-like status; the abuser creates an un-person, doing so for his own purposes and in his own image. His doing this overrides what had been created for loving relationship. Understanding this dynamic in terms of

---

[101] Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes*, pp.174-175
[102] Silverman, *Because I Remember Terror, Father, I Remember You*, p.206
[103] Silverman, *Because I Remember Terror, Father, I Remember You*, p.182
[104] Winkler, "Rape as Social Murder", p.14

idolatry, the child's submission, obedience and service to the abuser can be thought of the way that this dynamic might play itself out, as "unholy worship".

The phrase "unholy worship" is taken from Parker's thoughts on how she was forced to relate to her abuser as an outworking of the status her abuser had to her. After naming her struggle as "a struggle with idolatry", she writes, "The relationship I had with Frank was an unholy alliance, a bond that still hadn't been broken. The obeisance I rendered to him was unholy worship."[105] The way that an abused child has to live out her relationship to the abuser can then also be thought of in terms of idolatry, as the manifestation of a dynamic in which he situates himself in a position of great power over her and demands her absolute servitude. That this servitude is entwined in the bond a child feels towards an abuser results in a situation that can be seen as a horribly twisted version of a genuinely loving creator-creature relationship; an idolatrous relationship in which sadistic ownership and sexual slavery becomes the way a child belongs and loves. To quote Fraser again, "Around her throat is the bloody mark of a broken leash. She lays her outstretched palms against mine. They fit mine exactly. We are one. She says: 'I love my daddy.'"[106]

Child sacrifice as idolatry

> The gesture of sacrifice was familiar. I knew the rubrics of the ritual by heart: you cut away some part of yourself, then peace and security are restored, relationship is preserved, and shame is avoided.
>
> Rebecca Parker[107]

As an alternative way of looking at the dynamic of child sexual abuse in terms of idolatry, I want to look finally at those aspects of the role that the abused child may be forced to play that establish the child in a position where she is 'sacrificed' for the benefit of others. I will look at this firstly with regards to the child's taking on the role of being a sacrifice for the sake of the abuser's restoration, and secondly with regards the silencing of abuse as demanding repeated and prolonged sacrifices from those who have been abused.

[105] Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes*, p.195
[106] Fraser, *My Father's House*, pp.227
[107] Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes*, p.24

a) The child sacrificed to the abuser

Throughout the telling of her story, Parker returns to explore the notion of the abused child in what she calls a "Christ-like" role, silently bearing pain and giving her life away for the good of another person.[108] Parker raises questions about how her own readiness for self-sacrifice is connected both to an abusive relationship with the man who sexually abused her, and with a comparable abusive relationship with Christian theologies that exalt sacrifice as an appropriate personal aspiration, particularly for women,

> I recognized that Christianity had taught me that sacrifice is the way of life. I forgot the neighbor who raped me, but I could see that when theology presents Jesus' death as God's sacrifice of his beloved child for the sake of the world, it teaches that the highest love is sacrifice. To make sacrifice or to be sacrificed is virtuous and redemptive.[109]

Parker's description of the way she felt connected to her abuser during an act of abuse vividly portrays her overwhelming compulsion to give herself over to the abuser and they way that she did this. Recognising the abuser's own pain and confusion, she sees herself as trying to restore his own person through compassion, recounting,

> *I see his face. It is full of pain. I feel as if he is trying to get back his own face. As if, by forcing my face to wear the face of terror, I will be the mirror in which he will be restored to himself. He isn't looking at me. He is looking through me. He is looking at himself. In the presence of such pain, my heart awakes in compassion.*[110]

Elsewhere, Parker (with Joanne Carlson Brown) has written at length on the role of Christian theologies in creating a culture in which vulnerable and abused persons are encouraged to accept the violence of others.[111] She sees this as feeding into her own acceptance of the role she took in relation to her abuser, as well as the similar roles taken by women she has known and counselled in her role as a minister. Thinking about the way that the suffering Jesus is presented as a model for loving relationship, Parker and Brown place such a theology in the context of the reality of child abuse, asking, "When a

[108] Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes*, pp.189; 19
[109] Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes*, pp.24-25
[110] Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes*, p.197
[111] Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, "For God So Loved the World?", in Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn (eds.), *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989), pp.1-30

theology identifies love with suffering, what resources will its culture offer to such a child?"[112]

Exploring traditional atonement theologies, they criticise what they see as a glorification of suffering, and an implication, if not explicit instruction, that being a faithful disciple involves self-sacrificially enduring suffering for the sake of others. They argue,

> The imitator of Christ, which every faithful person is exhorted to be, can find herself choosing to endure suffering because she has become convinced that through her pain another whom she loves will escape pain. The disciple's role is to suffer in the place of others, as Jesus suffered for us all. But this glorification of suffering as salvific, held before us daily in the image of Jesus hanging from the cross, encourages women who are being abused to be more concerned about their victimizer than about themselves.[113]

In Parker's account of her own sexual abuse, she understands herself as giving herself to the abuser in a way that was intended to give his own self back to him, "I am the mirror/ Through which Frank becomes visible."[114] She sees her purpose as his "release from pain", and his restoration to himself. The result is what she sees as her having to sacrifice the child locked into this relationship, "I left her there for dead…I got out of that room somehow, but I left her there on the bed. Left her for dead."[115] Her own self-giving and self-sacrifice is understood as having this power to release and restore another person – a person who is hurting her – and it involves her taking a share in his pain, "That was the intensity of the bond. The glue was compassion."[116]

b) The child sacrificed to a social ideal

The second way of thinking about how the child may function in a role of sacrificial offering is to look at how she fits into this role more generally, looking beyond her abuser as the one for whom she is sacrificed, and asking who else benefits from the sacrifices and sacrificing of abused children. Imbens and Jonker state that in a woman who has been sexually abused, there may be a tendency for her to see herself as

[112] Brown and Parker, "For God So Loved the World?", p.9
[113] Brown and Parker, "For God So Loved the World?", p.8
[114] Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes*, p.174
[115] Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes*, p.196
[116] Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes*, p.197

something that should rightly be sacrificed for the good of others, "She has learned to feel responsible for others and tends to sacrifice herself for them."[117] The social pressures around someone who is being, or has been, sexually abused can also result in a situation that reflects the dynamic that Parker depicts – the sacrifice of the abused child.

Hilary Cashman begins her book *Christianity and Child Sexual Abuse* by describing a painting by Pieter Bruegel which shows a scene of a village crowd who appear frightened and tearful, but there seems to be no reason why. The villagers are shown performing everyday tasks, holding clothes to be washed, or leading livestock. The painting, originally titled, "The Massacre of the Innocents" had depicted a scene in which the village children had been murdered. For political reasons, the painting was altered so that the children were painted over; the larger children were turned into animals, and the smaller ones became the bundles of washing. Cashman writes, "So the dead children disappeared. Apart from the signs of fear and distress, there is no trace of them."[118]

Cashman presents this as an illustration of how the sexual abuse of children may be treated – that its reality has been denied in order to preserve institutions that would be threatened if the truth were spoken and heard. Writing of this silencing of child sexual abuse, she uses language of idolatry to emphasise the severity of the situation, "The family should not be an idol to which the child is sacrificed if it contains an abuser."[119] The image Cashman uses resonates with Parker's description of the dynamic of child-as-offering sacrificed to abuser-as-idol, only Cashman suggests the idol is a particular ideal of the family unit. Her suggestion is supported by Mildred Daley Pagelow and Pamela Johnson, who claim that one reason why there is sometimes an unwillingness to intervene in the sexual abuse of children in families is that the family is thought of as a "sacred institution."[120] It is emotionally easier to deny child sexual abuse, for "people prefer to cling to the image of the family as an institution representing the best of human interaction."[121]

---

[117] Imbens and Jonker, *Christianity and Incest*, p.155
[118] Cashman, *Christianity and Child Sexual Abuse*, p.1
[119] Cashman, *Christianity and Child Sexual Abuse*, p.91
[120] Mildred Daley Pagelow and Pam Johnson, "Abuse in the American Family" in Anne L. Horton and Judith A. Williamson (eds.), *Abuse and Religion: When Praying Isn't Enough* (Lexington, MS: Lexington Books, 1988), p.1
[121] Pagelow and Johnson, "Abuse in the American Family", p.2

Parkinson's accusation with regard to the church's silencing of child sexual abuse can be read as comparable to this. Parkinson writes "The Church muffles the screams of children in order to avoid damage to its reputation."[122] This can be read as an accusation not simply of a failure in justice or compassion (which would be bad enough), but as the practise of idolatry – this time with the church as an idol to which abused children are sacrificed.

If the response to child sexual abuse is to silence reports of what has happened in order to preserve valued institutions such as church or family, then this can be seen as replicating a dynamic identified as existing between abuser and child, but with an ideal of church or family as the idol. This suggests that the way that Christian communities choose to respond to child sexual abuse may be more significant than might have been thought – a response (or lack of response) that may have been considered a pastoral failing may in fact be presented as also the practice of a particular kind of idolatry in the church.

Conclusion

I opened this chapter with Leviticus 26:13, in which a nation of people is identified as belonging to a God who freed them from slavery so they were enabled "to walk with heads held high." I contrasted this with Fraser's vivid description of a sexually abused child understood as being possessed by her abuser, wearing around her neck the painful mark of his ownership and power over her. My purpose in contrasting these was to present the impact of child sexual abuse as a radical reversal of God's intentions for the identities of created persons. The abuser's actions can be interpreted as going against God's liberation and claiming of a people, and as recreating abused children as creatures belonging to their abusers. People supposedly liberated from slavery are recreated as slaves to abusers, effectively undoing the liberating work of God, and replicating God's creation of a people to serve God. Abused children have, in effect, been placed back under slavery, and had heavy yokes forced onto very small shoulders.

[122] Parkinson, *Child Sexual Abuse and the Churches*, p.4

The intention in presenting the nature and impact of childhood sexual abuse in these terms has been to show the possibility of articulating these experiences in such a way that they are clearly of relevance to Christian communities, and may have a home there. Interpreting the nature and impact of childhood sexual abuse in terms of its being such a fundamental assault of God's created people and God's purposes for those people demonstrates that these experiences can be articulated in a way that should be seen as greatly significant to Christian communities. If the meaning of childhood sexual abuse is understood as the theft, invasion, destruction and idolatrous recreation of that which God has created, then this experience is understood as being rich with meaning that belongs within Christian communities.

Having experimented with speaking about childhood sexual abuse in such a way that these experiences have meanings that belong in Christian communities, in the next chapter I will turn to look at the second half of my central question – that of how women who have been sexually abused can be people who belong in Christian communities in the sense that their lives and experiences are spoken alongside those of others. I will look at the ways and the extent to which churches have spoken about abuse, and thinking about how the voices of Christian communities on the subject of child sexual abuse might influence the question of whether women who have been sexually abused find and exercise a voice in these locations so that they and their past experience of abuse occupy these communities.

Chapter Five
People Who Belong in Christian Communities

> Silence begets more silence, the tightness of the circle is overwhelming at times. The victim's silence about her or his experience feeds society's silence which encourages the victim's silence to continue. The pastor's silence reflects and sustains society's silence which insures the victim's silence. Will these circles be broken?
>
> Marie Marshall Fortune[1]

> I clung to the church…because it was the only solid thing in my life, and as I clung to it the thorns kept going deeper and deeper into my own flesh.[2]

People Who Belong

The previous chapter addressed the first part of the research question, providing an illustration of how past experiences of childhood sexual abuse can belong in Christian communities in the sense of their taking on meanings that belong in these places. This chapter is concerned primarily with the second part of the question – that of how past experiences of abuse can belong in Christian communities in the sense of women who have been abused being able to speak their experiences in these places so that these women can be people who belong there.

The nature of the church[3] is such that it can serve as the context for experiences of abuse to be articulated with rich language and images provided by a theological vocabulary. The vocabulary it provides makes it possible for experiences of childhood sexual abuse to be interpreted in ways that have the advantages both of articulating these experiences in more depth than they might otherwise be articulated, and also of

[1] Marie Marshall Fortune, *Sexual Violence: The Unmentionable Sin* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1984), p.xiii

[2] Quoted in Sandra Butler, *Conspiracy of Silence: The Trauma of Incest* (New York: Bantam Books, 1979), p166, cited in Mary D. Pellauer, "A Theological Perspective on Sexual Assault", in Mary Pellauer et al (eds), *Sexual Assault and Abuse: A Handbook for Clergy and Religious Professionals*, (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), p.92

[3] Until this point I have chosen to think and write in terms of "Christian community" rather than "the church" because of issues of differences between churches, and because of my own experience of having a history of childhood sexual abuse given no place in any organised church structure, but rather of finding a place for this history in Christian community on the outskirts of formal church. In this chapter, I speak of "churches" or "the church" because the chapter involves looking at materials published by particular denominations, and because this is the terminology used by much of the literature engaged with in this chapter. In speaking of "churches" or "the church", I am referring to the places where Christian community is formally organised.

articulating these experiences in ways that assign them a place of belonging in those communities to which this vocabulary also belongs. The nature of the church is also that it can serve as the context for those living in the aftermath of abuse to have their experiences shared and borne by those around them. This provides opportunities that are exciting for the church, but also frightening. Any one particular church community may respond wonderfully, appallingly, or one of many places in between. It may provide a language and a space for the experiences of a sexually abused woman to take their place in the community, or it may silence and exclude her further. In this chapter, I will look at ways of thinking about where the response of the church might sit, and how it might function, in this movement between silence and speech.[4]

Throughout this chapter, when looking at ways that churches have responded to child sexual abuse, I will refer to a number of publications produced by churches and church groups, and relevant parts of the policies of specific church denominations on the protection of children and vulnerable adults in the church.[5] I will also refer to two publications produced by Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI): *The Courage to Tell: Christian Survivors of Sexual Abuse Tell Their Stories of Pain and Hope* (1999)[6], and *Time for Action: Sexual Abuse, the Churches, and a New Dawn for Survivors*

[4] Originally, I had intended to devote significant space to theological reflection on the church in relation to its treatment of the issue of childhood sexual abuse. I had intended to look at the significance of the churches' response to this issue given their identity and mission as the Body of Christ. In the end I made the decision not to do this, mainly because any commitment I have to an organised church is far outbalanced by my commitment to the women who have been sexually abused. While a theological reflection on the responses of organised churches to this issue would be valuable for the churches, my priority was with women who have been abused, and not with the churches. This was particularly the case given the fact that the response of the churches to the occurrence of child sexual abuse has at times been to focus on how sexual abuse has harmed the church rather than how it has harmed those who have been abused (something I shall return to later in the chapter).

[5] The policies referred to are: House of Bishops, *Protecting all God's Children: The Child Protection Policy for the Church of England*, 4th edition (London: Church House Publishing, 2010); House of Bishops, *Promoting a Safe Church: Policy for Safeguarding Adults in the Church of England* (London: Church House Publishing, 2006); Methodist Conference, *Safeguarding: A Methodist response to the Codes of Practice of the Home Office and Scottish Office concerning the protection of children and young people* (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 2003); Catholic Safeguarding Advisory Service, *National Policies for Creating a Safe Environment for Vulnerable People in the Catholic Church in England and Wales*, 2010, http://www.csasprocedures.uk.net/chapters/p_nat_pol_crea.html; Susan Wheatley, *Handbook for Child Protection in the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh, Saint Andrews Press, 2005).

[6] Margaret Kennedy, *The Courage to Tell: Christian Survivors of Sexual Abuse Tell Their Stories of Pain and Hope* (London: CTBI, 1999)

(2002)[7]; as well as the report "Tracing Rainbows Through the Rain: The Report of the *Time for Action* Monitoring Group to the Methodist Conference, 2006."[8]

In the first part of the chapter, I will look at how churches have responded, and continue to respond, to the revelation of the reality of child sexual abuse; its prevalence and its impact. I will consider their responses in a way that parallels the movement between silence and speech that has run through previous chapters. In the second part of the chapter, I will turn to consider how the kind of response that a church makes might influence the movement between the silence and speech of an abused woman in the church, that is, the extent to which her experiences and history can be spoken alongside that of others in the community. I will look at the impact of the language used by churches to talk about abuse and its effects, and aspects of liturgy and worship that may impact in particular ways on women who have been sexually abused, facilitating or impeding their belonging in these places. In the third part of the chapter I will consider the value and significance of a Christian community's choosing to listen to the voices of women who have been abused.

The Church's Movement between Silence and Speech

The revelation and acknowledgement of child sexual abuse

> Finally, like a sleeping giant, the church is waking to the problem of sexual abuse.
>
> Marie Marshall Fortune[9]

Literature on the church's response to the exposure of the occurrence of child sexual abuse often begins by looking at the church's silence, denial, or resistance to acknowledging the reality of abuse, particularly within its own communities, and even more so when perpetrated by its clergy or leaders.[10] There are varying views on the

[7] Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, *Time for Action: Sexual abuse, the Churches and a New Dawn for Survivors* (London: Church House Publishing, 2002)
[8] Methodist Conference, "Tracing Rainbows Through the Rain: The Report of the *Time for Action* Monitoring Group to the Methodist Conference 2006", www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/Conf06_Safeguarding_pcfull.doc
[9] Fortune, writing in the foreward to Carolyn Holderread Heggen, *Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes and Churches* (Scottdale, PA.; Waterloo, Ontario: Herald Press, 1993), p.11
[10] Fortune, *Sexual Violence*, pp.xi-xiv; Heggen, *Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes and Churches*; Pamela Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar: Violence Against Women and the Church's Response* (Minneapolis:

reasons for the churches' silence on child sexual abuse, ranging from accusations of gross incompetency and conspiracy around abuse, to suggestions of emotional avoidance and ignorance among church leadership and communities, to the identification of values that are held by churches and which have made it especially difficult for the reality of child sexual abuse to be admitted and addressed.

Over the past two decades it has been the Catholic church that has come under particularly loud media fire at the revelation of the sexual abuse of children by priests and religious, together with the church's concealment of abuse and its protection of abusers.[11] Statements from those within the Catholic church reveal a preoccupation with concern to preserve the status quo, in particular the well-being and reputation of the church, over and above a commitment to repentance, justice or reform. The Report by the Commission of Investigation into Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin identifies the church's concern about its own reputation as one of the factors that led to what it terms a "culture of secrecy"[12] in the Archdiocese's response to allegations of child sexual abuse. The report states,

> The Dublin Archdiocese's pre-occupations in dealing with cases of child sexual abuse, at least until the mid 1990s, were the maintenance of secrecy, the avoidance of scandal, the protection of the reputation of the Church, and the preservation of its assets. All other considerations, including the welfare of children and justice for victims, were subordinated to these priorities. The Archdiocese did not implement its own canon law rules and did its best to avoid any application of the law of the State.[13]

Bishop Colm O'Reilly, writing in 1999 about the resistance of the Catholic church in Ireland to accepting the truth of the revelations of reports of sexual abuse of children by Catholic priests, says,

> [L]et me acknowledge that it has been difficult for us to avoid being defensive. It is natural, or maybe I should say second nature to us, to be defensive. We hold certain values dear and who would blame us for wanting to safeguard them? We lived in a culture where it was deemed to be totally normal for a bishop to defend a priest and protect him, almost whatever the situation was.[14]

Fortress Press, 1995), pp.1-14, 147-154; Jane Chervous, *From Silence to Sanctuary: A Guide to Understanding, Responding to and Preventing Abuse* (London: SPCK, 2004), pp.1-3

[11] "Catholic Church sex abuse scandals around the world", BBC News, 14 September 2010, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8576268.stm

[12] Commission of Investigation, "Report into the Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin", 2009, http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/PB09000504, p.8

[13] Commission of Investigation, "Report into the Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin", p.4

[14] Colm O'Reilly, "The Dilemma of those in Authority", in Eamonn Conway et al (eds.), *The Church and Child Sexual Abuse: Towards a Pastoral Response* (Dublin: Columba Press, 1999), p.62

O'Reilly does not clarify exactly what these "certain values" are that the church holds dear, but it seems from the context that they concern the status of the church and the reputations of those in positions of church leadership. Mary Pellauer points to this issue, saying, "Often hearing [victims' stories] meant that we had to confront the unknown or find a center of gravity in our own authority."[15] For churches built on hierarchy, with respect and authority awarded at each level to those in the level above, the revelation of child sexual abuse by those awarded such a status has undermined this structure by which individuals within the hierarchy are held in high esteem.

But while the Catholic church has been heavily criticised, quite rightly, for its appalling handling of reports of child sexual abuse in its own churches, similar practices and attitudes can be seen in other denominations that have perhaps received less attention while the media spotlight was angled towards Dublin and Rome.[16] Prevailing attitudes within the church and beyond have undoubtedly helped to create an environment in which abuse has been allowed to continue without adequate challenge or even acknowledgement for far too long. While it is beyond the scope of this discussion to offer any claim of a comprehensive overview or analysis of the factors that have created the "culture of secrecy" that prevailed in churches on the issue of child sexual abuse, some remarks can be made on factors that have been identified as significant.

One such factor is that the practice of listening to the voices of children, particularly when their complaint goes against the interests of adults, is strongly counter-cultural.[17] This extends to a lack of inclination to hearing and believing the stories of adults who were sexually abused as children, particularly when the majority of those

[15] Pellauer, "Invitations to the Reader", in Pellauer et al (eds.), *Sexual Assault and Abuse*, p.xi-x

[16] In the UK, in February 2010, reviews carried out of Church of England files were revealed to have contained evidence of the Church failing to investigate sufficiently allegations of child sexual abuse against four priests and seven other church workers (Heidi Blake, "Child sex abuse allegations uncovered in Church of England files", *The Telegraph*, 25 February 2010, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/religion/7307962/Child-sex-abuse-allegations-uncovered-in-Church-of-England-files.html). The Anglican Church in Canada has had to admit responsibility for its role in the sexual abuse of native Canadian children in residential church-run schools during the twentieth century, (Mike Fox"Canada strikes deal on church abuse", BBC News 20 November 2002, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/2497199.stm). Also in the Anglican Church, there have been a string of substantiated child sexual abuse allegations in Australia, and a failure on the part of the church to take action, (Tony Koch, "Archbishop 'failed to act' on sex abuse" *The Australian*, November 11 2006, http://www.news.com.au/archbishop-failed-to-act-on-sex-abuse/story-e6frfkp9-1111112504293, and Kevin Meade, "Church quiet on abuse for 26 years", *The Australian*, November 7 2006, http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/nation/church-quiet-on-abuse-for-26-years/story-e6frg6nf-1111112481155).

[17] See Neerosh Mudaly and Chris Goddard, *The Truth is Longer than a Lie: Children's Experiences of Abuse and Professional Interventions* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2006), pp.17-33

abused are girls, and the majority of abusers are men.[18] Women and girls have not found themselves to be speaking into a place in which their voices have equal value – an attitude that many have argued is especially prevalent in churches.[19] Children who have been abused (and adults who were abused as children) are not likely to find any corroboration for their stories, so the lack of attention or credibility attributed to their voices and perspectives is a significant barrier to the alleviation of secrecy around child sexual abuse.

So one factor feeding into the silence is a lack of integrity granted to those who have been abused. A second factor is that the details of their stories are ones that, on a number of levels, create significant dissonance if, when, and where they are spoken. This can partly be attributed to the fact that these details are horrible to contend with on an emotional level. One suggestion, made by Pamela Cooper-White in her book *The Cry of Tamar: Violence Against Women and the Church's Response*, is that even among the very best intentioned of people, there is a huge resistance to believing women's stories of sexual abuse in childhood. She identifies as the over-arching reason for this simply that facing the full truth of child sexual abuse is just too difficult – it demands too much emotionally from an individual, church, or wider community,

> [N]o one wants to face the horror and pain of victims' experiences, and particularly to accept the pervasiveness of sexual abuse. To face the truth is to realize it is happening everywhere, on our streets, in our schools and daycare centers, and in our homes. We do not want to be drawn into anyone's pain, especially children's pain.[20]

Mary Pellauer, too, identifies the emotional difficulty of hearing the facts of experiences of childhood sexual abuse, and about the church as a venue for such abuse, saying,

> Sometimes it was scary to allow ourselves to hear these parts of victims' stories. Sometimes hearing meant we had to feel the anger and pain – not just about the assault but about the church. Sometimes hearing meant that we had to be challenged by a gracious faithfulness beyond our own. [21]

Presumptions about the safety of particular places and people can be identified as a third factor feeding into churches' silence on child sexual abuse. With regards the

---

[18] See "Sex Offenders and Sex Offences Against Children: Key Child Protection Statistics" compiled by the NSPCC Child Protection Awareness and Diversity Department in December 2007, http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/research/statistics/sex_offenders_statistics_wda48745.html.
[19] See in particular Riet Bons-Storm, *The Incredible Woman: Listening to Women's Silences in Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), pp.114-133, and also Chevous, *From Silence to Sanctuary*, pp.30-31.
[20] Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar*, p.147
[21] Pellauer, "Invitations to the Reader", p.xi-x

people who are assumed to be safe, the influence of "the myth of the molesting stranger"[22], according to which, "child molesters" are demonised and conceived of as especially twisted evil people unknown to the child, conceals the reality that in the overwhelming majority of cases, the perpetrator of child sexual abuse is a close relative or family friend.[23] Far from the image of a sinister character lurking in the shadows ready to jump out and attack their unsuspecting victim, it is far more likely that a child will be sexually abused by a person who is known and trusted by the child and by others around them. The reality of the child abuser who appears to be perfectly "normal" goes against the social stereotype of the child molester, as well as forcing the recognition that those abusing children are the people we would encounter on the street, in the workplace, in the school playground, teaching the Sunday school, and in our own families.

Also significant are assumptions about the relative safety of the Christian community in comparison to the world "out there". Margaret Kennedy, writing in the introduction to *The Courage to Tell*, says,

> In our churches...there are myths around that Christian people would never sexually abuse children; that somehow faith prevents such things happening…It has been assumed that the environment of the Christian home, the Church and church groups is safer for children than the 'nasty' secular world.[24]

Partly this can be put down to a faith in the character and behaviour of the people who belong to a church community, but Kennedy also notes the impact of the belief that surely God would not allow us to remain in the dark about such a thing, "that the Holy Spirit would open our eyes to the abuse *if* it was happening."[25] Admitting the reality of child sexual abuse then becomes a statement of doubt concerning God's protection – a statement even more unacceptable than one that casts doubt on the character of a Christian abuser.

These myths about the immunity of Christian communities to the occurrence of abuse, and a presumption-masquerading-as-faith with regards a divine alarm bell to

---

[22] Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar*, p.150
[23] According to statistics compiled by the NSPCC in 2007, 16% of children aged under 16 had been sexually abused. Only 5% had been abused by a stranger; in 4% of cases the offender was a parent or relative, and in 11% of cases the offender was someone known to them. In cases of rape of children under 16, those under the age of 12 were least likely to have been raped by a stranger and most likely to have been raped by a friend or family member (NSPCC, "Sex Offenders and Sex Offences Against Children").
[24] Kennedy, *The Courage to Tell*, p.6
[25] Kennedy, *The Courage to Tell*, p.6

signal its prevalence, were brought to an end with the continued complaints of the sexual abuse of children by those in positions of church leadership. The impact on church communities was, Kennedy writes, enormous, "Suddenly, we realised that leaders among us, held in high esteem, and who had credibility and status, betrayed us and our children."[26] There is perhaps a sense in which 'grooming' can be thought of as applying not just to abused children, but also to whole church communities, as particular beliefs about God, about the characters of Christians, and therefore about the safety of Christian communities, combine to create a place in which children can easily be abused because there is little in place to protect them, and little chance of the occurrence of abuse being believed.

This is in no way an exhaustive or conclusive discussion of those factors that have contributed to the existence of a culture of silence in churches on the issue of child sexual abuse, but it gives a picture of the church as a place that, until very recently, simply has not wanted to speak up or hear about the sexual abuse of children. The movement away from silence on the prevalence of abuse has been undertaken because it was no longer possible to avoid making this movement. As is expressed in Marie Marshall Fortune's words at the beginning of this section, in which she compares the church to "a sleeping giant", the church's "waking up to the reality of the problem of sexual abuse" has been a reluctant and sluggish one. However, it has happened, at least in certain ways to a certain extent. The Foreword of the 2002 CTBI publication *Time for Action* acknowledges that in response to increasing awareness of sexual abuse, most churches have worked hard to produce effective child protection procedures, and some have considered how to respond to offenders who want to be part of the church community.[27]

The production of child protection materials, and their implementation, can only be a positive thing, and a church's commitment to child protection can go some way to reassuring those subjected to abuse in the past, particularly those abused by others in the churches, that the church at least now acknowledges that abuse does and has happened, such that there need to be structures in place to prevent it as far as possible and address it when it does take place. One contributor to *The Courage to Tell*, writes, "What would I

[26] Kennedy, *The Courage to Tell*, p6
[27] CTBI, *Time for Action*, p.xi

say to the Church now? I would ask them to believe us, protect us, to support us, safely. To make sure that children are safe in church and school."[28]

Knowing that there are policies put in place in the churches is of some comfort to those who have been most impacted by past failures to prevent abuse. However, it has been pointed out by those examining the church's response to sexual abuse that while the churches have indeed worked hard to implement child protection policies, they have been less attentive to providing a space for the voices of people who have been abused.[29] Margaret Kennedy, writing in *The Courage to Tell*, makes this point,

> Many Churches are now really working hard on issues of child protection. All denominations have policies and procedures to follow in order to protect children. This has been a wonderful sign in our Churches to adult survivors that sexual abuse is recognised as causing great harm. We believe there is more freedom for adults to speak out now that the ball is rolling. Nevertheless, there is still a great deal for the Christian to learn, especially about how this experience has impacted upon us.[30]

Some denominations more than others do now recognise the importance of incorporating into their policy-making and implementation those who have been abused in the past, and see the purpose of doing so as the benefit of the church's good practice in preventing future abuse. Jane Chevous, in her book *From Silence to Sanctuary,* emphasises the importance as well as the common sense of this, writing, "Their

---

[28] Kennedy, *The Courage to Tell*, p.41

[29] It is the case though that there are differences between denominations on the issue of involving in policy making and implementation people who have been sexually abused. The Methodist Church, in particular, has taken care to seek and incorporate views of people who have been abused when thinking about its policies and how they are put into practice, with its 2006 report *Tracing Rainbows Through the Rain* opening by stating, "First, we need to hear the experience of survivors of abuse. We need to listen to their stories." More than a third of the report consists of the experiences and reflections of people who have been abused. This contrasts sharply with the Church of Scotland's 2009 report by the Forgiveness and Proportionality Working Group, *Joint Report of the Mission and Discipleship Council and Safeguarding Committee, "For of Such is the Kingdom of Heaven: Creating a Church Where All May Safely Live"*, 2009, http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0016/5083/forgiveness_proportionality_2009.pdf. This report begins with the stated intention, "to discover and set out how the theological concept of forgiveness in Christianity may shape the policy and practice of the church in relation to the involvement of sex offenders in the life of congregations" (p.3). Nowhere in the report is any space given to the voices or perspectives of people who have been sexually abused. This is despite the report's containing a section headed "Silencing of Survivors" (Section 8, pp.9-11), which specifically warns about the dangers of not taking seriously the pain of people who have been sexually abused, "If the Church does not take their pain, suffering and courage seriously, they suffer once again and are abused by the very institution, or group, which should, in its character and basis in the message of Jesus, support and protect them" (Section 8.4, p.9). The Forgiveness and Proportionality group apparently failed to realise that including the voices and insights of these people in the church's policy-making would be a way in which the church could take their pain seriously.

[30] Kennedy, *The Courage to Tell*, p.56

experience and its cost should be honoured in the formation of policy and the implementation of practice at all levels. What better experts do we have?"[31]

The policy of the Methodist Church of England and Wales highlights the importance of involving the whole church community in the implementing of its Safeguarding policy, and suggests that it might do this through discussing the policy in meetings and in small groups, by involving children and young people in presenting the issue to the church, and by addressing in worship the issues involved in thinking about child protection. Recommending the incorporation of the issue of child protection into the life of the church, and ensuring the voices of the most vulnerable are heard, has the potential to create a church community that values and encourages speech about the reality of abuse, and resists the silencing of these facts. It is one in which these voices can belong. Developing this point, in the next section I will look at the incorporation into church life of speech on issues connected to child sexual abuse.

The experience of sexual abuse spoken in church life

A silence in churches on the occurrence of child sexual abuse, whether perpetrated by its own members and employees or not, is paralleled by a silence in churches on the theological and pastoral issues raised by abuse. Churches' silence on this is all the more stark when contrasted with their willingness to speak out about other social and political issues, allowing space for them in the liturgical calendar. Both the reports published by CTBI point out that while the churches' years incorporate a number of 'special' Sundays dedicated to particular social causes that are significant to the church (examples given are Prisoners' Sunday, Homelessness Sunday, Disability Sunday, Racial Justice Sunday), no church as yet has such a thing as a Sunday dedicated to addressing issues around sexual abuse. Margaret Kennedy, writing in *The Courage to Tell*, also points out that the subject of child sexual abuse, in comparison to other important issues, tends to remain absent during regular services,

> [W]e are well used to prayers of intercession. We have prayers for sick people, those who are dying, those living with AIDS or HIV, homeless people, prisoners…but rarely for those children being sexually abused now, or adults who were sexually abused in childhood.[32]

[31] Chervous, *From Silence to Sanctuary*, p.51
[32] Kennedy, *The Courage to Tell*, p.73

The second CTBI report, *Time for Action*, draws a connection between the churches' neglect of victims of sexual abuse within its congregations with its neglect of the victims of sexual abuse recorded in the Bible. Looking at biblical accounts of sexual abuse, the report notes that in these stories the women who are abused play a minor role in a narrative that is primarily concerned with the concerns of the men in the story. The offence of sexual abuse of these women is presented as an offence against the men to whom they belong, and at no point is any consideration given to the needs of the woman victim, "no one in the stories as they are recorded cares about the survivors; their suffering is not regarded with compassion or regret or even anger. There is no loyalty or care for them. They do not matter."[33] The point made in *Time for Action* is that the missing voices and perspectives of abused women whose stories are recorded in scripture have, until very recently, never been a concern of the church. The way these stories have been read and interpreted reflects the lack of concern for victims of sexual abuse in scripture,

> [I]t has taken the Christian Church nigh on 2000 years to notice that no one cared for them. This is our holy book, but we have read it with blinkers. We have read it through the eyes of powerful men, and it has materially affected the ways that survivors have been treated for centuries.[34]

One such account that can be reflected on as an illustration of this point is the story in 2 Samuel 13 of Amnon's rape of his half-sister, Tamar. The treatment of this story in its re-tellings in churches and in its interpretation in biblical scholarship are the subjects of Cooper-White's book, *The Cry of Tamar*, and the second chapter of Phyllis Trible's book, *Texts of Terror*, both of which draw attention to the lack of care or attention to Tamar's own experience, with the impact of the rape on her largely overlooked while its wider impact on the men around her is the focus of the narrative. Cooper-White points out that in this narrative the rape victim does have a voice in her story up until a certain point. This fact makes her stand out among the biblical victims of rape, who are barely recorded as saying a word. Tamar, however, resists her rapist, protests at his treatment of her, and once the rape is committed and she is thrown out of her rapist's house, she expresses her grief visually and publicly, "Tamar put ashes on her head, and tore the ornamented robe she was wearing. She put her hands on her head and went away, weeping aloud as she went" (2 Samuel 13:19). Tamar's voice disappears

[33] CTBI, *Time for Action*, p.124
[34] CTBI, *Time for Action*, p.125

from the narrative after her story is told to her brother, Absalom, and her father, David. It is their responses that conspire to erase Tamar's voice from the story of the aftermath of her rape. Cooper-White writes,

> [A]ll power to act or even to speak is taken away from her. It becomes men's business. In the end, the father to all three of the principal characters in this drama, as well as all the father's servants, are seen to mourn and weep bitterly day after day – not for the victim – but for the perpetrator and the victim's brother.[35]

Phyllis Trible's study of the same narrative makes the more subtle point that although Tamar does speak out against her rapist's actions both before the rape and afterwards, when she then resists his dismissal of her, the text alludes to her powerlessness by never prefacing her speech with her name. Trible identifies in the text a pattern of the male characters' speech always following "Jonadab said, Amnon said, David said, and Absalom said. Such a pattern occurs even where the pronoun *he* would suffice...By contrast, the name Tamar never prefaces her speeches."[36] This difference, Trible suggests, is subtly indicative of the differential of power between Tamar and the male characters in the story, "Without her name, she lacks power. Nonetheless, she speaks reason and wisdom."[37]

The interpretation of this story in biblical scholarship is such that the dynamic inherent in the interpretation can be criticised for mirroring the male silencing of the rape victim's voice that makes up the second half of 2 Samuel 13. One commentary Cooper-White refers to is Kyle McCarter's, published in 1984, which presents the damage caused by the rape of Tamar chiefly in terms of the damage to the social structure of Israel,

> Most fundamentally, chap. 13 is a story of *nebala*, 'sacrilege'…*nebala* is a violation of the sacred taboos that define and maintain the social structure and, as such, represents a serious threat to the society itself. This particular 'sacrilige' committed here is incestuous rape…The initial sacrilege…will precipitate the destruction of the entire social unit, the family. And because this particular family is the royal family, the social fabric of all Israel will finally be threatened.[38]

Cooper-White asks the question: Who is encompassed in this understanding of family, or the social fabric of Israel? Tamar's rape is seen as causing damage solely because it

---

[35] Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar*, p.1
[36] Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror* (London: SCM, 2002), p.34
[37] Trible, *Texts of Terror*, p.34
[38] P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., *2 Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible Series (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984), pp.327-328, cited in Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar*, p.11

causes damage to the men who surround her, both in the way the story is recorded in the text, and in the way it is interpreted here.[39]

A slightly earlier commentary, speaking about chapters 9-20, says, "Throughout the account of David's reign there shines the conviction that Israel is the people of the Lord and that his providence is at work in their history."[40] The question that can be asked of this is, as Cooper-White puts it, "Providence for whom? Not for Tamar, whose voice vanishes from the narration long before the story is over."[41] At a later point, Cooper-White asks the question, "Where was God for Tamar?"[42] Reading the story as it is told in the text, and as, she argues, it has been read and interpreted in biblical scholarship, the conclusion can only be, "God was somewhere else, pulling the strings of the male power elite, maneuvering Israel's destiny through the men's machinations for power and property."[43] God is involved in the men's struggles through their battles and power disputes, but absent from the plight of the young women victims of these battles.

The purpose in discussing this is to make the point that alongside a widespread silence in churches on the issues raised by child sexual abuse, there is also a tradition of churches, when they do actually speak of incidents of sexual abuse, doing so in such a way that their re-telling of these stories further pushes into silence those women who have been sexually abused. The problem is simultaneously an absence of speech, and also the wrong kind of speech, because unless the Biblical stories of sexual violence are read and interpreted in Christian communities in ways that take care to draw attention to the voices of those who are abused, then the re-tellings will continue to encourage a prevailing silence on the experience and significance of childhood sexual abuse. The re-telling will be the telling of a story about those issues that were and are still considered to be important to those with power, but will not be the telling of a story about the abuse that was suffered.

---

[39] An interesting parallel could be drawn here between this point about the concern in the story being the concern about the damage caused to the "social fabric", and the concern that was been identified by the report into the conduct of the Archdiocese of Dublin (cited above) in their cover-ups of abuse.
[40] William F. Stinespring, Preface, *New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha, Expanded Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), p.374, cited in Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar*, p.11
[41] Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar*, p.11
[42] Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar*, p.42
[43] Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar*, p.42

Tamar is subjected to disempowerment at the hands of every other character in the narrative as it is told: her rapist-brother Anmon, his conspirator Jonadab, her brother Absolom, her father David who expresses no grief or care for his daughter's plight, and all the men who at the end of the story are grieving for the rapist. Further to this is the fact that the narrator, and the vast majority of translators and commentators, have compounded the silencing and disempowering of Tamar.[44] This could be countered by challenging this attitude of inattention to Tamar's voice whenever the story is read or told, and that hiding behind the excuse of women's silence as the social and cultural norm in the story's context does not provide an excuse for perpetuating this in the present day, "to the extent that we simply accept the bias of the narrator as time- and culture-bound, rather than critically examining it and challenging it, we run the risk of becoming complicit with it."[45] Challenging the inattention to Tamar's voice at the same time helps to challenge the inattention to the voices of women who have been sexually abused. The church becomes a place where these voices matter and are valued as voices worth hearing.

Cooper-White identifies as a crucial element in putting a stop to violence against women, the necessity of hearing stories of women's abuse from the perspectives of women who have been abused. The stories should be heard, she argues, "from their own viewpoint insofar as this is possible. This is true whether the story is about the rape of a girl three thousand years ago in Jerusalem or of a next-door neighbor tomorrow."[46] In the case of Tamar's story, Cooper-White experiments with re-telling the story using the act of *subversive memory*.[47] The approach, developed by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza[48],

[44] Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar*, p.12
[45] Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar*, p13
[46] Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar*, p14
[47] Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar*, p.1
[48] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, Second edition, (London: SCM, 1994). In the first chapter of her book, Fiorenza sets out a "feminist critical hermeneutic", according to which the women whose stories are told in biblical narratives in ways that leave them largely absent from those stories (p.29) are "reclaimed" so that the memory of these women is reconstructed in a way that critically engages with the social and religious oppression of women at the time at which the text was written, and as this oppression is played out in the lives of contemporary women, "Rather than *abandon* the memory of our foresisters' sufferings and hopes in our common patriarchal Christian past, Christian feminists *reclaim* their sufferings and struggles in and through the subversive power of the 'remembered past'...Such a 'subversive memory not only keeps alive the suffering and hopes of Christian women in the past but also allows for a universal solidarity of sisterhood with all women of the past, present, and future who follow the same vision" (p.31). Doing so means that a history that Fiorenza argues has been constructed as androcentric can be reconstructed in such a way that this history belongs too to the women who are marginalised as it is more usually narrated, "A feminist critical hermeneutic must...move on from androcentric texts to their social-historical contexts. It not only has to claim the contemporary community of women struggling for liberation as its locus of

uses imagination and creativity to retrieve voices of biblical women. Cooper-White re-tells Tamar's story from the perspective of Absalom's daughter, named after her aunt. Her re-telling pays particular attention to each sentence uttered by Tamar, unpacking it with reference to the historical and cultural context in which Tamar's words are spoken, and the thoughts and feelings that may have accompanied them. Her re-telling of Tamar's immediate reaction to being raped and then cast out by her rapist-brother, reads,

> She went, weeping and distraught, barely able to walk. On her way she did not try to hide what had happened, but defiantly rent her robes and put ashes on her head so that others would see how she had been wronged. She arrived home and told my father, Absalom, the whole story. He did not say much, and did not join with her in expressing anger. Instead he tried to calm her down and reminded her not to betray the family's honor by speaking of this. "After all," he told her, "he *is* your brother, too." Yes, she thought, I called out to him as brother, but he did not honor me as his sister.
>
> They tell me that after that Tamar went quietly around their house like a ghost, pale and ill and weeping. She was like an empty shell. Even her anger and outrage had been beaten out of her.[49]

Schüssler Fiorenza's method does not purport to tell *the* truth about these events, but it does provide one possible truth, from a perspective that is never presented in the text.[50] The act of doing this entails questioning the biases of the narrator, as well as subsequent commentators and readers. It means that we do not "uncritically absorb his [the narrator's] rendering of the story as the truth, rather than one of many possible truths."[51] Instead, we question how the manner in which this story has been told and received has contributed to the silencing of the woman whose story is told, and women with stories like hers.

When it comes to hearing the voices of today's abused women, the churches face the need for a radical critique and transformation of deeply engrained attitudes, approaches and practices. The ways in which churches operate, the ways they are structured, their customs regarding whose voices are ordinarily heard and on which

---

revelation, it also must reclaim its foresisters as victims *and* subjects participating in patriarchal culture. It must do so not by creating a gynocentric life-center on the fringes of androcentric culture and history, but by reclaiming such androcentric human and biblical history as women's own history" (p.29)

[49] Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar*, p.4

[50] Arguably, this truth is truer than the truth presented in the text. Fiorenza argues that the way in which women are marginalised and rendered invisible by biblical texts and their reconstruction "may erase women as active participants in history", but that this is a function of the antrocentric nature of the texts and their interpretation rather than something that can be established as an accurate reflection of history, "Regardless of how androcentric texts may erase women from histography, they do not prove the actual absence of women from the center of patriarchal history and biblical revelation" (p.29).

[51] Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar*, p.14

topics – all these factors are influences on abused women's speaking in the church. In the next part of this chapter I will look at aspects of church life and custom that could impede the movement from silence to speech for a woman who has been sexually abused.

The Silence of Sexually Abused Women in the Church

Having raised questions about how the church's response to child sexual abuse can be placed on a spectrum between silence and speech, it is the purpose of this part of the chapter to think about how aspects of church life, worship and teaching function to influence an abused woman's movement between silence and speech. Firstly, I will look at the kinds of language that have been used to talk about child sexual abuse, and secondly at aspects of liturgies and worship that can have particular impacts on an abused woman's speaking in this location about her experiences.

When speech silences

> [T]hose who control the actual language used to describe and name experiences are those who assign value and who retain power in a particular culture…The theological language that clergy and religious professionals use to describe abuse reflects much about the theological value and meaning assigned to abuse by religious institutions themselves."
>
> Margaret F. Arms[52]

There are two aspects of the church's language about child sexual abuse and its impact on victims that I will look at in this section. The first is whether the language used always accurately conveys the severity of the act of abuse, questioning how and why those from within the church have at times used language that has the effect of censoring the gravity and brutality of child sexual abuse. Secondly, there is the question of whose language those speaking for the church choose to use to talk about the impact of abuse. I will look at the influence of the clinical discourse, and the significance (given

[52] Margaret F. Arms, "When Forgiveness Is Not the Issue in Forgiveness: Religious Complicity in Abuse and Privatized Forgiveness", in Marie Marshall Fortune and Joretta Marshall (eds.), *Forgiveness and Abuse: Jewish and Christian Reflections* (New York: Haworth Press, 2002), p.116

the focus of how these experiences may belong in Christian communities) of favouring clinical over theological interpretations of the impact of abuse.

a) Child sexual abuse and "sanitized theological language"

The phrase, "sanitized theological language" is borrowed from Margaret Arms, who uses the term to describe a tendency she has observed in the manner in which religious leaders and pastors have, through their choice of language, veiled the truth about violence and abuse. She defines the phrase, "sanitized theological language", as "the substitution of a less onerous theological term for a stronger one."[53] The example she gives is that of research she conducted with a sample of adult sexual trauma survivors and a sample of clergy, in which she found differences in the theological language that these groups used when describing experiences of abuse – those who had been abused described their abuse as experiences of evildoing, whereas the clergy spoke about them as examples of sin. Arms argues that the choice of the term "sin" instead of "evil" to describe acts of abuse hides the full truth of what happened by making it appear less harmful.[54] She argues also that because sin is universal, speaking of abuse in these terms gives the impression that abusive behaviour is universal and therefore 'normal', when this is not the case, "Yes, we are all sinners; we are not all abusive."[55] She accuses those who fall into this tendency of "sanitized theological language" of reflecting the approach of the perpetrator of abuse, since his approach "seeks to normalize and minimize harmful and destructive behaviors."[56]

[53] Arms, "When Forgiveness Is Not the Issue in Forgiveness", p.116. Mudaly and Goddard, in *The Truth is Longer than a Lie*, are critical of a similar practice that they identify in medical research into child abuse. They point out papers that refer to "battered child syndrome" (Kempe et al, "The Battered-Child Syndrome", *Journal of the American Medical Association* 181, 1, 1962, pp.17-24), "neglected baby syndrome" (D. Bialestock, "Neglected Babies: A study of 289 babies admitted consecutively to a reception centre", *Medical Journal of Australia*, 2, 1966pp.1129-33), and "maltreatment syndrome" (R.G. Birrell and J.H.W. Birrell, "The 'Maltreatment Syndrome' in Children", *Medical Journal of Australia*, 2, 1962, pp.1134-38) have the effect of minimising the reality of what is abuse, "the term 'neglected babies' used by Bialestock is somewhat euphemistic as it is stated that many had minor abrasions and bruises, and that limb and skull fractures were not rare" (p.20). Talking about child abuse as a "syndrome" suffered by a child also has the effect, as in the practice of the assigning of psychiatric conditions, of naming abuse as a condition that is present in a child rather than a crime that is perpetrated by an adult.

[54] Arms does not set out her theological understanding of either "sin" or "evil"; I understand her as making the point that as the words are spoken in popular usage, the word evil carries more gravity.

[55] Arms, "When Forgiveness is not the Issue in Forgiveness", p.117

[56] Arms, "When Forgiveness is not the Issue in Forgiveness", p.117

The tendency that Arms identifies can be seen time and again when church leaders speak of child sexual abuse. Eamonn Conway, a Catholic priest, throughout his paper "The Service of a Different Kingdom" uses the terms "sexual misconduct" and "sexual irregularities"[57], making child sexual abuse sound more like a matter of bad etiquette or social anomaly than a crime with devastating effects. Conway also cites Benedictine theologian Sebastian Moore who, lamenting the impact of the Catholic church's resistance to accepting the truth of child sexual abuse, writes, "now our order is manifesting, to an embarrassing degree, the symptoms of denial, of resistance to the change which is being demanded of man generally…as dioceses are bankrupting themselves with lawsuits over sexual irregularities."[58] Here, the reduction of the devastation caused to victims of sexual abuse occurs both through his choice of the language used to describe the offence, as well as focussing on the damage that these offences have caused, not to the abused children, but to the church.

Eugene Duffy, also a Catholic priest, and writing in the same book as Conway, calls the church to compassion for the offenders, arguing for the benefits of therapeutic programmes where people who have committed sexual abuse against children could be housed and supervised, before being reintegrated into "a normal living situation, where their *weakness* is acknowledged, without having to be treated in a purely punitive fashion."[59] Duffy goes on to present his argument for this treatment of child sex offenders as a reflection of Jesus' ministry to sinners – a way of restoring and honouring their dignity, "The challenge to stand with the public sinner is never an easy one, yet it is the great paradox of the sinless Jesus that he was himself condemned for his socialising with the public sinners of his time, including those guilty of *sexual deviance*."[60] His argument is disputable, since there is of course no account of Jesus socialising with child sex offenders. Duffy does not clarify who it is he has in mind when stating that Jesus socialises with "those guilty of sexual deviance", but it is difficult to place child sex offenders in this category of persons with whom Jesus socialised, thereby restoring and honouring their dignity, when Jesus' message to those who sin against a child is far from

[57] Eamonn Conway, "The Service of a Different Kingdom: Child Sexual Abuse and the Response of the Church", in Conway et al (eds.), *The Church and Child Sexual Abuse*, pp.76-90
[58] Sebastian Moore, "The Bedded Axle-Tree", in William Loewe and Vernon Gregson (eds.), *Jesus Crucified and Risen* (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1998), cited in Conway, "The Service of a Different Kingdom", p.77
[59] Eugene Duffy, "Forgiveness and Reconciliation in the Context of Child Sexual Abuse", in Conway et al (eds.), *The Church and Child Sexual Abuse*, pp.74-75. Emphasis added.
[60] Duffy, "Forgiveness and Reconciliation in the Context of Child Sexual Abuse", pp.74-75. Emphasis added.

one of solidarity or restoration, "But if anyone causes one of these little ones – those who believe in me – to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung round their neck and they were drowned in the depths of the sea" (Matt 18:6).

It is not my intention to make any general conclusions about churches' tendencies to speak about child sexual abuse in words that dilute or conceal its severity, but the fact that there are those who have chosen to use this sanitized language highlights that this is a danger to be aware of. Whether it is a deliberate choice by those in positions of church leadership and whose use of this language is part of the denial of the significance of allegations of abuse against their institutions[61], or whether the use of such language is the result of genuine ignorance, the result is much the same. Language that downplays the horrific nature of child sexual abuse, or conceals its truth altogether, will never function positively in protecting children from abuse, because it will not seem that they are being protected from anything so terrible, so any sense of urgency or necessity is reduced. It will also never function positively in enabling people who have been abused to speak about their abuse and pursue justice, because what was done to them is presented in such a way that it seems 'not so bad really.' Women's painful stories of childhood sexual abuse will never belong in a community that denies the pain in those stories, or conceals the truth of the crime that has been committed. "Sanitized theological language" dictates the use of particular kinds of vocabulary when telling stories of abuse, and this vocabulary is such that for the victims of abuse it might seem hardly worth telling those stories.

b) Child sexual abuse and the abandoning of theological language

Another significant aspect of the churches' language in discussions of child sexual abuse is the choice to adopt medicalised interpretations of the impact of abuse. The CTBI *Time for Action* report makes the important point that within the very limited statutory services made available to those who have been abused, there is a tendency "to pathologize the victim as 'ill'", when in fact a "great many" are not.[62] However, this same tendency can be observed both on and beneath the surface of some of the material

[61] It may be significant that I have observed this tendency to "sanitise language" more often in literature by those representing the Catholic Church than literature connected to any other denomination.
[62] CTBI, *Time for Action*, pp.24-25

produced by churches, and by those writing from within churches, on issues connected to child sexual abuse.

Time for Action's own description of the impact of sexual abuse actually provides one example of a church publication's favouring interpretations of these experiences and behaviours that presents them in terms of pathology. Its discussion of these effects under the heading "The nature of the harm" lists effects that may result from being sexually abused as a child: physical harm; psychological and emotional distortion; issues of trust; shame, guilt and self-blame; fears, phobias, flashbacks and panic attacks; sex, sexuality and intimacy difficulties, anger and rage; self-harm; isolation; powerlessness and lack of confidence; sleep problems; loss and grief.[63] It is striking that a publication that sets out to think about the impact of child sexual abuse specifically related to people situated within the church, discusses the impact of abuse under headings that carry no theological content whatsoever. In these headings, and the descriptions given under each one, there is no attempt made to think about the impact of abuse theologically, no mention of any spiritual questions raised by abuse. God is kept out of this, and is not even mentioned. Perhaps God is absent from the aftermath of sexual abuse? Or perhaps the impact of sexual abuse is not seen as something that can be articulated using theological language?

Immediately following this sobering catalogue of injuries, the report states, "Human beings have physiological, emotional, mental and spiritual responses to all experiences." Over the next two pages, there is elaboration on this statement under the headings "Physiological responses" and "Psychological and emotional responses", but spiritual responses disappear, and are never brought back into the discussion. It would be strange enough for any publication to list "spiritual responses" as part of the impact, and then to drop the topic entirely, choosing to focus on any response apart from spiritual responses. For this to happen in a publication produced by churches is especially odd.[64]

---

[63] CTBI, *Time for Action*, pp.40-46

[64] Cooper White's choice of terms in which to discuss the impact of child sexual abuse is similarly heavy on psychological terminology. Her chapter on child sexual abuse combines sociology and psychology, presenting as the effects of this kind of abuse as post-traumatic stress, depression, nightmares, sleep problems, anxiety, repression of memories, and dissociation (pp.157-161), followed by a two page long list of after-effects as indicators of sexual abuse – all of which are concerned with physical and psychological/emotional symptoms (pp.162-163). This is especially striking given the contrast with the chapters on either side of this, which address other forms of violence against women. In the previous chapter on rape, she writes, "rape is the forcible entry into the most private, most vulnerable, and, arguably most sacred parts of the human body, and, as such, it is a spiritual crime as well as a physical one." (p.82) The chapter that follows, which is on ritualistic abuse, begins:

The reader is then presented with a diagram showing the psychological processes through which the experience of child sexual abuse is processed by the person who was abused, followed by a further two pages of discussion of the "emotional and behavioural responses to abuse". Again, all mention of God remains absent throughout this section, and no theological vocabulary is used. As another example, the Church of England's policy on protecting vulnerable adults contains a section on the "Care of adult survivors of abuse in the Church."[65] This includes a subsection headed "Effects of abuse", under which is given a list similar to that in *Time for Action*, and which is presented in terms of a "range of symptoms."[66]

There are two areas of danger with the churches' choosing to adopt a clinical interpretation regarding the impact of abuse, and both have the potential to impede an abused woman's movement towards speech in the church. Firstly, the churches' adopting this language means that many of the problems identified in chapter two with the clinical discourse now apply in the church, where, it could be argued, they are even more inappropriate. If the church chooses to understand the impact of abuse as a litany of psychological troubles internal to the victim, this means that the church too avoids having to acknowledge and confront the wider social and political context in which abuse takes place, including its own possible complicity. Relying on clinical understandings

---

> This chapter is about courage and the miraculous capacity of the human mind to endure in the face of shattering evil. It is about the experience of dwelling day after day, even year after year, in the valley of the shadow of death. It is about outlasting intimate experiences of terror and about the strength of the soul. It is about the incarnation of Love through sheer survival. It is about God's presence wracked by torture. It is about the crucifixion. Even more, it is about resurrection. (p.169)

It is not clear why rape is about the invasion of the sacred parts of the human body, and surviving ritualistic abuse is about the incarnation of Love, the crucifixion and the resurrection, while child sexual abuse is about dissociation, depression and post-traumatic stress.

[65] House of Bishops, *Promoting a Safe Church*, pp.19-22

[66] House of Bishops, *Promoting a Safe Church*. The list reads:

- Repeated bouts of depression;
- Exhibiting anger or hostility – or being unable to connect at all with feelings;
- Behaving like a victim – low self-esteem and putting themselves down and constantly apologizing;
- Inability to get close to people, or wanting to be inappropriately close;
- Disturbed sleep, nightmares and so on;
- Tending to 'space out' (cutting off from reality);
- Exhibiting fears, phobias and anxiety;
- Self-harming (this is a way of coping, not something done 'to get attention');
- Tending to feel an inappropriate amount of guilt and shame;
- Sometimes relying on smoking, drugs, alcohol or medication;
- Experiencing hallucinations and/or 'flashbacks' of the abuse;
- Sometimes moving from one abusive relationship to another.

diverts the church's attention away from the horror of the abusive acts and the features of the environment that allowed them to be committed. It also presents victims of abuse as problems to be dealt with by mental health professionals, providing an invaluable means by which churches may wash their hands of the demands and challenges that victims of abuse bring into the community of faith. A flight into the language of psychology removes from the church the call to its own transformation, because whatever problem there is is located inside individuals who have been abused, rather than throughout the whole community.

One example of this happening can be seen in the Church of Scotland's Handbook on Child Protection, within its section on Supporting adults who were abused in childhood. This section contains no suggestions about what kind of support could be offered by those offering pastoral care, besides making a referral to one of two secular organisations who may be able to provide information on counselling. As far as the role a minister may play in supporting someone who was abused in childhood, the only advice given is,

> Ministers and others working in a pastoral care role in the Church should be aware of their own limitations in terms of the help and expertise they can offer. Sometimes giving the most constructive support can be encouraging an approach to appropriately trained counsellors or therapists."[67]

The implication is that when the church encounters adults who were abused in childhood, rather than considering how to support them, it is to be encouraged (apparently as its only pastoral response) to consider referring them to an agency outside the church. Mary Pellauer argues against the tendency that she sees of churches' beliefs and claims that victims of sexual assault require specialist interventions that the church cannot provide. Rather, she argues, victims of sexual assault are just people living in the aftermath of one of life's more horrible experiences,

> It may be helpful for religious leaders to understand that victims do not necessarily require psychotherapy, esoteric techniques, or the expertise gained in long years of training. Rape trauma syndrome is not an illness or a personality disorder. It is a normal response to abnormally traumatic events.[68]

The point made in chapter two concerning psychiatric diagnosis as an unjustifiable, unhelpful, and inappropriately negative way of looking at abused women, is also of particular relevance in relation to the churches' relying on these diagnostic

[67]Wheatley, *Handbook for Child Protection in the Church of Scotland*, Unit 5, Section 4
[68] Pellauer, "Invitations to the Reader", p.xvi

categories. In critiquing the process of psychiatric diagnosis, I argued that looking at a person with the intention of seeing only negative features of that person could not be justified in a clinical setting; in a church setting, even less so. In any case, to look at a person in this way results in more of a caricature than a real person. Margaret Kennedy cautions against an over-focus on negative aspects of the lives of people who have been abused. After presenting a list of possible negative impacts of abuse, she writes, "people should not assume that the difficulties we face are *always* intense, *always* destructive (although for some they can be). Nor can it be said that our lives are *always* blighted by these features."[69]

So the first way in which the churches' reliance on the clinical discourse may function to keep abused women silent is that it conspires with psychiatry in forcing the problem of child sexual abuse inside the victim in a way that presents her as embodying the sickness that should rightly be attributed to the external circumstances. She may also be less likely to speak because the process of pathologising the victim could well have the effect of making her less credible to those around her. Attracta Shields, director of the Western Theological Institute in Galway, and also a psychologist and psychotherapist, writes in *The Church and Child Sexual Abuse*, "Women who were themselves sexually abused may have cognitive impairment, which results in distorted thought processes and identification with their abuser."[70] Would a woman who hears herself described in such a way in the church see any point in trying to speak? Who would take her seriously?

The second danger with the reliance on the clinical discourse is that it has the odd consequence that when the church talks in this way about the impact of child sexual abuse, it abandons the theological language it uses at other times, as if this language is irrelevant or inadequate when thinking through these issues. This may function to keep abused women silent and isolated in the churches because if the church does not use its own language to talk about child sexual abuse, this implies that child sexual abuse is not a subject matter that is 'at home' in the church. If it uses a secular and clinical language alone in discussing the impact of child sexual abuse, then the church implies that the aftermath of abuse is not its business, and it is to be discussed independently of the issues

[69] Kennedy, *The Courage to Tell*, p.58
[70] Attracta Shields, "Beyond the Myths: Child Sexual Abuse by Females", in Conway et al (eds.), *The Church and Child Sexual Abuse*, p.32

that more usually or properly concern the church. It is an experience that the church apparently cannot accommodate in its vocabulary. And if it cannot accommodate the experience in its vocabulary, does it then follow that it cannot accommodate it in its congregations?

When worship and teaching silence abused women

So far in this chapter I have looked at ways in which the churches have remained silent on the occurrence of child sexual abuse and the issues it raises, and at ways in which the churches have spoken about it, but in ways that enforce the silences of women who have been abused. In this section, I remain concerned with the ways in which churches may enforce these silences, but here I take a step back from looking at the ways they speak specifically about childhood sexual abuse, to consider those more general customs and practices that contribute to the maintaining of these silences.

Literature produced by those within the church on the difficulties faced by people who have been sexually abused, will often go through a list of practices performed in churches that may be especially difficult for them. These typically focus on the choice and use of language and imagery in liturgies and services, and with the role of physical touch. The section "Care of adult survivors of abuse in the Church" in the Church of England's policy on safeguarding adults contains a list of aspects of church life and worship services that might present particular problems for adults with abuse in their pasts. These include the use of particular words such as "Father God", phrases such as "let Jesus come into you", emphasis on sin, having to be physically close to other people, and the touching involved with anointing or at the Peace.[71]

Similarly, Jeanette Gosney's booklet, *Surviving Childhood Sexual Abuse: Supporting Adults in the Church*, devotes a chapter to looking at aspects of church that may be problematic for people who were sexually abused as children. She looks at areas of: preaching and teaching on sexuality and violence; the guilt and shame involved in confession; touch and anointing; tears and vulnerability; songs, hymns and language for

[71] House of Bishops, *Promoting a Safe Church*, p.21

God.[72] She then considers the value of special services for people who have been sexually abused. Jane A. Boyajian also highlights the importance of those in the church taking the time to think about the impact of their traditions on those who have been abused, and challenges churches with the question, "How do our liturgies inflict pain and afflict the despairing without our knowing?"[73]

While these are important points to make, and important questions to ask, the purpose of this section is more precisely to think about how church practices not so much inflict harm (though clearly they do), but how they might function as another factor that silences the voice of a woman who has been sexually abused. The question is, more specifically, how might these teachings and practices function to silence and to impede belonging?

One significant area is that of the values that are held in high esteem, and communicated as such, in Christian communities, but which are values that may be counterintuitive to those with a history of sexual abuse. An example would be the way in which the command, "Honour thy father and thy mother" is presented and used in churches. Margaret Kennedy claims that this command has been interpreted in such a way as to aid in the creation of the myth that the abuse of children by their parents does not happen in "'good' Christian homes." She also argues that when this command is taken in a non-critical and non-contextualised way, it has led to the denial of accusations of abuse and the rebuking of children who disclosed abuse by their 'good' Christian parents. When status and respect is bestowed in this blanket style on Christian parents, it is far more difficult for a Christian abused child, or a Christian adult abused by her parents as a child, to speak out about it.

Another value that may jar with experiences of women who have been sexually abused is the way that churches may idealise virginity and purity. This has been raised particularly as an issue for those women situated in a Catholic tradition (though sexual purity is by no means a "Catholic" value, with movements emphasising the central value

[72] Jeanette Gosney, *Surviving Childhood Sexual Abuse: Supporting Adults in the Church* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2002), pp.22-23
[73] Jane A. Boyajian, "Standing By Victims of Sexual Violence: Pastoral Issues" in Pellauer et al (eds), *Sexual Assault and Abuse*, p.113

of purity emerging from evangelical traditions[74]). Kennedy gives as an illustration the story and canonisation of Maria Goretti, who was made a saint because of her resistance to rape – resistance that led to her murder, "She kept her virginity in tact, for this she was canonised."[75] The prayer of Maria Goretti emphasises the virtue of her "martyrdom" for the sake of sexual purity,

> Oh Saint Maria Goretti who, strengthened by God's grace, did not hesitate even at the age of twelve to shed your blood and sacrifice life itself to defend your virginal purity, look graciously on the unhappy human race which has strayed far from the path of eternal salvation. Teach us all, and especially youth, with what courage and promptitude we should flee for the love of Jesus anything that could offend Him or stain our souls with sin…

How is a Catholic woman or girl who has been raped likely to respond in this environment? Admitting the rape amounts to confessing a failure to escape this deed that has then caused offence to God, and a stain on the woman's soul. Is it an environment in which women are likely to feel able to speak their experiences of sexual abuse?

The values, the liturgy and the preaching that make up worship services and church life, whether they intend to or not subtly or not so subtly clarify who it is who belongs. Those people who belong are those people whose experiences are acknowledged and given a place while those whose experiences do not fit so well with these practices are nudged or shoved to the outskirts of Christian community. Looking at the role of liturgy and the purposes it serves, Gosney points out that the confession used in churches leaves unaddressed the kind of guilt felt by those who are living in the aftermath of sexual abuse, "There is usually no liturgical means of dealing with that. So week after week they carry the deep-seated belief that they are guilty sinners."[76] It is true that the way that Gosney phrases this issue does leave her open to the reply that it is not primarily the purpose of confession to provide psychological or emotional relief, and so there is no reason why this should be a place in the service that functions to relieve the guilt felt by people who have been abused. What her point raises though is the problem of there just not being any place in a liturgy where the experience and impact of sexual abuse will fit. There *is* space in the liturgy for an abuser to address his actions (and

[74] One example of this is "The Silver Ring Thing", which hosts large-scale events worldwide (to date, over 700 events in eight countries), teaching the importance of abstinence, as well as forgiveness and the opportunity to embrace a "second virginity". Its statistics record 451,000 teenage attendees so far, with 154,500 "purity commitments" being made. The project describes itself in these words, "The Silver Ring Thing is a unique para-church youth ministry that promotes the message of purity and abstinence until marriage" ("What is Silver Ring Thing?", http://www.silverringthing.com/whatissrt.asp).
[75] Margaret Kennedy, "Christianity and Child Sexual Abuse – the Survivors' Voice Leading to Change", *Child Abuse Review* 9 (2000), p.131
[76] Gosney, *Surviving Childhood Sexual Abuse*, p.15

without any risk of public shame or consequence) and ask for forgiveness, but there is no space for his victims to speak or address the impact of his actions on their lives.

In the Methodist Church's report *Tracing Rainbows Through the Rain*, the section on the ministry of the church asks the questions, "Whose church is it? Whose ministry is it?"[77] A church that values the authority of the patriarchal family, worships God as a father-figure to the neglect of other Biblical images of God, extols the virtue of sexual purity and the "innocence" of children, and builds into its services the forgiveness of the sins of perpetrators but mentions nothing of the impact of their sins on their victims, may be experienced as so alien to a woman who has been sexually abused by her father, within her patriarchal family, that she ends up feeling this is not a community in which she belongs; this is not a God or a community that has anything positive to do with her experiences of living in the world.

At the heart of the identification of those aspects of church liturgy and practice that are difficult and even dangerous for those who have been abused, the points to remember are that the same words and the same practices have different meanings and impact in different ways on people with different pasts and different presents, *and* that there are certain groups of people who historically have not been awarded any role in the formulation or performance of those words or practices. *Time for Action* gives as an example, the way that the message of salvation is taught, with its constant call to the people to remember who they once were, and who they now are,

> *Remember you were slaves in Egypt…remember you were slaves…remember how you were in the past…remember who you were…*
> The litany of memory runs through the Bible like a heartbeat.[78]

This message, presented to the whole church, is really to the benefit of a particular group in the church, with the presumption of universality. This "heartbeat" enlivens some, but the fallacy is in the presumption that this is the message the whole church needs to hear, without qualification. Failing to remember past slavery is not a struggle for everyone. The report continues with the question, "But what if the problem is not that you forget you were a slave? What if the problem is that you cannot remember anything else?"[79]

[77] Methodist Conference, "Tracing Rainbows Through the Rain", Section 3, "Our Ministry"
[78] CTBI, *Time for Action*, p.115
[79] CTBI, *Time for Action*, p.115

The report goes on to point out that properly understood, liturgy and worship are the work of "the people", and that this includes people who have been abused. The final section of the earlier CTBI publication, *The Courage to Tell*, which looks at experiences with church of people who have been abused, is entitled, "Oh, to be included!"[80] It is not that any special treatment is being requested; it is that the point is being made time and time again that by *not* noticing and incorporating the experiences and meanings of child sexual abuse into church life, the church excludes this particular group of people. A glaring question here is how any church can assume the right to exclude any group, let alone a group of people who have been on the receiving end of oppression and injustice which the church is supposed to be concerned about. *Time for Action* phrases the issue as follows,

> Surely as part of the people of God they might also expect to have their experience, their hopes and regrets, their gifts and wounds, their words and images represented in the offering of worship and preaching. By what authority and in whose interest are they excluded?[81]

Ultimately it is in no one's interests that they are excluded. For worship and teaching to be arranged in such a way that neglects the most vulnerable people in the congregation may be comfortable for some, but it is not faithful to what the church is called to be. Does the church exist in order to function in a way that protects the most powerful from the disturbing experiences and insights of the least powerful? *Time for Action* suggests that it is due to the churches' fear that victims of abuse remain excluded from church life, "Is it the case that the Church institutionally does not, in its heart of hearts, trust the silenced people, may even fear the challenge they present?"[82]

In the next part of the chapter, I will look at the importance of including in the speech of Christian communities the voices of women who have been sexually abused, arguing that doing so performs a vital function both for these women and for these communities in general.

[80] Kennedy, *The Courage to Tell*, pp.73-80
[81] CTBI, *Time for Action*, p.116
[82] CTBI, *Time for Action*, p.116

Choosing to Hear Silenced Voices

> Sometimes…it has been the Church's need for order and tradition, its songs and its liturgies which have re-opened old wounds or caused further pain for survivors of childhood sexual abuse. So our journey towards hope is one in which the whole Church must recognise its need for the saving love of God. We believe our task is one that we do best together as Church and as survivors through careful listening to and learning from each other.
>
> *Tracing Rainbows Through the Rain*[83]

In this final part of this chapter I will be addressing the question of why it is so important that Christian women who have been sexually abused might articulate their experiences in ways that are firmly located in the vocabulary and the practices of Christian communities. I will look at the value of this in two directions – in the first section, looking at the benefits to abused women who can speak and be heard in the church; and in the second section, looking at how the voices of abused women may be of service to the church.

The pastoral importance of including the voices of abused women

The challenge to listen to the voices of woman who have been sexually abused is one that will be taken up by a church concerned for the pastoral needs of those who are among the most vulnerable in its congregation. It will be a church that seeks to understand better the experiences of this group, so that those who have been sexually abused have the opportunity to grow spiritually along with those whose experiences and perspectives might otherwise have determined 'the truth' regarding God, Bible, and church life.

In the previous chapter, I looked at the isolation and disconnection – what Cathy Winkler called "social murder" - that can be seen as resulting from sexual abuse. Martha Ramsey had described her feeling of "living as if I were behind glass", making it impossible for her to feel any sense of the reality of or a connection with the people and environment around her.[84] This image of living behind glass is also used by Jeanette Gosney, writing about this sense of "difference" that she has observed in people who

[83] Methodist Conference, *Tracing Rainbows Through the Rain*, Introduction
[84] Martha Ramsey, *Where I Stopped: Remembering an Adolescent Rape* (San Diego; New York; London: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1995), p.234

have been sexually abused. Gosney writes, "It is as if a pane of glass separates them from the rest of the world. Somehow the abuse has set them apart, isolating them into a world of their own which simply does not connect with others."[85] Their efforts to appear to fit in, and to be "normal" can lead to what she describes as, "the exhaustion of trying to fit into a world where they feel they do not belong."[86]

The exhaustion of trying to fit into a world where they feel they do not belong can easily become specifically the exhaustion of trying to fit into a church where they feel they do not belong, where that church seldom mentions in appropriate ways those experiences through which women who have been sexually abused can feel so isolated and different. They remain separated and disconnected by a pane of glass that their experience may have issued, but which the church has maintained. The particular separation and disconnection inflicted by the churches' actions and omissions is of a nature that the way in which it may impact women who have been sexually abused is one that causes more harm than 'just' social disconnection. The harm caused by the church may additionally impede these women's access to worship in community. The harm caused by the church then threatens the particular kinds of relationships that flourish in this context, as well as threatening a relationship with God. The harm that the church can do extends far beyond damage to social connections, to potentially reinforce what was characterised in chapter four as a fundamental impact of childhood sexual abuse – the assault of persons as the persons God created them to be as individuals and in community.

Unless the church becomes a place where abused voices can speak and be heard, the lasting sense of isolation, abandonment, difference felt by a woman who has been sexually abused, will extend to the experiences that she has in the church. By being a place where voices of abused women are awarded equal value, by being a place where voices of abused women are part of the collective voice, the church provides that safe place in which they can speak. By speaking in the church community, a woman who has been abused situates herself as locating a space among other voices in a community. She belongs. The Methodist report *Tracing Rainbows Through the Rain* contains an extended theological reflection by a woman who has been sexually abused, on the

[85] Gosney, *Surviving Childhood Sexual Abuse*, p.8
[86] Gosney, *Surviving Childhood Sexual Abuse*, p.8

meanings and impacts that various liturgies, hymns and songs have had on her. This section is introduced with the words,

> As we listen to, and hear, this one person's reflections, as a Christian, upon her story and its consequences for her on the worship of the Church and our proclamation of the Gospel, then these reflections – her story – become part of our story.[87]

Her belonging in this story places her in a web of relationships, with God and with those in the Christian community around her.

This will necessarily happen slowly, and will necessitate risk-taking on the part of the woman who chooses to speak, since the church will not be this place of safety for people who have been abused until it includes their voices, but it cannot become this place of safety without being led there by the voices of people who have been abused. It is necessary then for people who have been abused to speak into a place that is not yet safe. The difficulty and the risk involved in doing this means that it is a sign of enormous commitment to the church for an abused woman to take that risk and speak out about her abuse in a church that has not yet become a safe place.

The existence of organisations such as CSSA (Christian Survivors of Sexual Abuse) and MACSAS (Minister and Clergy Sexual Abuse Survivors) is evidence that there are those who believe the risk to be worth it. Margaret Kennedy, the founder and coordinator of CSSA and MACSAS, writes, "The biggest call might be for you [the churches] to hear our stories, if we wish to tell, and for you to respond in a way that is empowering, not destructive."[88] This implies that she acknowledges the real possibility that the response may well be destructive rather than empowering. Another sexually abused woman whose story is told in the same book, presents as her request to the church, "Please listen to us, hear us, welcome us and acknowledge and challenge what we tell you."[89] Here, she requests acknowledgement, but even before the church has become a place in which she sees the voices of sexually abused people being heard, she accepts that those listening can challenge what she says. Indeed, she invites them to do so. The request then is not for special treatment or special status, but just to be listened to and included in the conversation in the same way that other perspectives are listened to and included in the conversation – acknowledged and challenged.

---

[87] Methodist Conference, *Tracing Rainbows Through the Rain*, Section 2
[88] Kennedy, *The Courage to Tell*, p.60
[89] Kennedy, *The Courage to Tell*, p.20

A church can start on the road to being a safe place in which the voices of abused women can be heard, by realising they are present and by recognising that they may have differing (which does not equate to incorrect) perspectives on what is done and said in church. Carolyn Holderread Heggen writes, "Each time the congregation gathers, both victims and perpetrators of abuse are present. Those who plan and lead worship need to keep this sobering but inescapable reality in mind."[90] Self awareness may be a first step, with an openness to critique, "Avoiding harm and bringing aid mean learning the realities about sexual violence and understanding the subtle messages our language conveys to victims."[91]

By becoming a place that acknowledges these different perspectives, and allows its customs and traditions to be challenged by them, the church becomes a safer place. Worship and teaching delivered with awareness of these "subtle messages" conveyed to people who have been sexually abused, is an indication that the church is starting to take notice of these perspectives in a way that shows them to be considered as having some value and significance among other perspectives.

Alan Hilliard, writing specifically about victims of clergy sexual abuse, says, "They need to be listened to, accepted and reassured that their voices are heard."[92] I would amend this slightly by arguing that it is not so much that they need to be reassured, but rather that they need to be *shown* that their voices are heard. If the church functions in such a way that it is clear the voices of sexually abused people are of equal significance to the voices of anyone else (and especially to the voices that have traditionally carried the most weight), then verbal reassurance will not be necessary. In their book *No Place for Abuse*, Catherine Clark Kroeger and Nancy Nason-Clark state that the act of listening attentively to the stories of people who have been abused is meaningful above and beyond assuring people of the importance of their stories. They write,

> When we listen to others' stories, we validate their experience. Our silence and our attention says, *What has happened to you is important to me: I am willing to listen*. We can tell people until the cows come home that we are interested in

[90] Heggen, *Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes and Churches*, p.153
[91] Boyajian, "Standing By Victims of Sexual Violence", p.116
[92] Alan Hilliard, "Do you want to be well again?", in Conway et al (eds.), *The Church and Child Sexual Abuse*, p.53

them, but if we never listen intently to what they have to say, our words are like a tinkling bell or a clanging cymbal (1 Corinthians 13:1)."[93]

If the church is committed to shattering the pane of glass that sets apart those who have been sexually abused, it must be prepared to treat these people and their perspectives as being of equal value to others.[94] This must go beyond simply a spoken commitment, and be one that can clearly be seen. Mary D. Pellauer says of victims of sexual assault, "They need to have their stories believed, *seriously believed*, by those to whom they speak."[95] Believing *seriously* in a person's story will mean that the church is willing to be vulnerable enough and humble enough to lay itself open to critique and transformation. It will admit its past faults and the impact of these on the abused people who are now starting to speak, and it will be willing to move forward in constant accountability to those voices as well as to the many and varied other voices within the church. It is the church's openness to the challenge to move itself from silence to speech on the issue of child sexual abuse, to stand with women who have been sexually abused and to demand justice with them, that will function to reassure an abused woman that this church is a place where her voice will be heard. The church's doing this is worth more than any verbal reassurance that voices of abused women are heard, while in fact church continues as if these voices had never spoken.

In this location, the potential for transformation for people who have been sexually abused is significant and exciting. One child sexual abuse victim cited by Hilary Cashman, says, "My faith has been very important – but it's just a *personal* faith, just God and me."[96] A faith that involves "God, Christian community, wider world, and me" is one in which an abused woman can grow socially and spiritually, into someone whose person and experiences occupy a place of significance among others. Patrick Parkinson writes, "The Church could have an important ministry to women and men who have been sexually abused if ministers and other leaders were better able to understand what it is that they have been through and the ways in which it has affected their life and

[93] Catherine Clark Kroeger and Nancy Nason-Clark, *No Place for Abuse: Biblical and Practical Resources to Counteract Domestic Violence* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2001), p.53
[94] That said, in keeping with the principles I laid out in chapter one regarding the prioritising of the voices of women who have been abused, there could be cause to attribute more weight in churches to these perspectives than to others, in order to ensure they are heard.
[95] Pellauer, "A Theological Perspective on Sexual Assault", p94. Italics in original.
[96] Hilary Cashman, *Christianity and Child Sexual Abuse* (London: SPCK, 1993), p.50

faith."[97] It is also true that if these experiences and their impact on life and faith were understood in churches, those churches would become places in which people who have been sexually abused would feel safe enough to become positively and genuinely involved in ministry that may currently be off limits to them.

The significance of the creation of these places cannot be underestimated. For women who have been sexually abused, to have a place to be heard, to belong, and to minister alongside others in the church community provides an opportunity for them to move from silence towards speech, and from isolation towards belonging. The church can play a vital role in this process by acknowledging, listening to, and incorporating these voices into its way of life. Recognising this, Catherine Clark Kroeger and Nancy Nason-Clark present a longing from and for the church,

> May God grant us eyes to see the suffering of women and men around the world, ears to hear their sometimes silent cries for help, hearts that are moved to respond to their pain, and feet that are willing to accompany victims on their healing journey.[98]

<u>The voices of abused women in service to the church</u>

As I argued in the previous section, by becoming a safe place for abused voices to speak, the church has the potential to become a place of transformation for women who have been sexually abused. Towards the end of the section, I made the point that the church cannot become such a place without allowing itself to be critiqued and shaped by these voices. It would be inappropriate for the church to assume it could become a place of transformation in a way that continued to exclude these voices, and it simply would not be possible. In this section, I suggest that while childhood sexual abuse results in injuries and long term impacts on the individuals who were abused, there are also significant ways in which the church has been injured, and it too needs to be transformed; anything that may be termed "healing" is needed by the church just as much as it is needed by women who have been abused.

A church that believes and accepts part of its identity as suffering alongside those in its community who have been abused, knows the need for its own healing. A church

[97] Patrick Parkinson, *Child Sexual Abuse and the Churches* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1997), p.4
[98] Kroeger and Nason-Clark, *No Place for Abuse*, p.75

that denies entirely this role, refusing to acknowledge the sexual abuse perpetrated against children, is equally, if not more so, injured by these crimes. Any church that contains a person sexually abused as a child bears suffering alongside her, whether or not this suffering is in any way acknowledged or consciously borne.[99] It could be the suffering that is denied that is most in need of transformation, and the voices of those who have been abused have the potential to play a role in this transformation if only they could be heard.

The voices of women who have been abused may have the potential to alert the church to its own need for transformation, calling it to be a place that speaks up for those who cannot speak for themselves (Proverbs 31:8). The church, by becoming a place in which women who have been abused are heard, believed, and respected has the potential not only to be a part of the healing and transformation of those women, but also to allow those women to be a part of the church's own healing and transformation. The church stands to benefit from as well as to contribute to this process.

It is not my intention though to paint an idealised picture of what this might look like, or of what women who have been sexually abused have to offer to the church. Carolyn Holderread Heggen gives a particular perspective on the value of the experiences and insights of people who have been sexually abused, and the benefits they bring for the future of the church. She writes,

> The difficult inner work of remembering and healing which such survivors have done is not just for themselves but also for the generations which follow. They are a joy and inspiration to behold. Instead of shunning them and wishing they'd go away with their terrible tales, we need to honor their strength, salute their courage, and learn from their journey.[100]

While appreciating the sentiment of this evaluation, I think it important not to idealise or valorise abused women. Often they are not a joy to behold. They can be difficult, loud and messy, and their "terrible tales" are not necessarily of a content or told in a way that is inspiring. I doubt the value of describing abused women in a way that makes them sound like heroes. Eamonn Conway says of adults who were sexually abused as children, "These people have a mission to the church."[101] This may be true, but it is

[99] "In the context of the body of Christ, no one is unaffected by this betrayal of trust. And the healing of the body too places demands on the whole community of faith." (CTBI, *Time for Action*, p.125)
[100] Heggen, *Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes and Churches*, p.48
[101] Conway, "The Service of a Different Kingdom: Child Sexual Abuse and the Response of the Church", p.88

probably only true insofar as everyone has a mission to the church. There is nothing heroic about having been sexually abused – "saluting" is unnecessary and unwanted. One woman writing her story in *The Courage to Tell* says, "We can play a useful part in the Church. We want people to see us as people, not as people who have been abused."[102]

Bearing this in mind, nevertheless the particular experiences and insights of women who have been sexually abused have the potential to challenge the church in ways that may serve to shape it into a community that is more authentic with regard to its own mission. Another woman writing in *The Courage to Tell* says, "It is not easy to join a Christian community, share in their worship and in the life of the church. On the other hand I feel I have a lot to give and not in spite of my past but because of it."[103] The suggestion is only that a conversation in which the voices of sexually abused women are heard, respected, and permitted a place in Christian communities, is a conversation with the potential to effect transformation in these women *and* in the community to which and in which they speak.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have looked at the church's movement between silence and speech on the subject of childhood sexual abuse, and at how the ways the churches speak (or not) about abuse may influence the extent to which and the manner in which women who have been abused may be people who belong in Christian communities. I argued that a community in which women were silenced or in which their experiences were spoken in vocabulary that was not central to the life of the community, would be a community to which these women could not fully or positively belong. In the last section I began to look at the need for the voices of women who have been abused to be part of the speech of churches, for the benefit of those communities as well as for the benefit of the women who would then have a place to speak.

While chapter four was intended to show that it is possible for women's experiences of abuse to be articulated in terms that belonged in Christian communities,

[102] Kennedy, *The Courage to Tell*, p.24
[103] Kennedy, *The Courage to Tell*, p.47

this chapter has been concerned with the importance of these women's actually speaking in these places. The achievement of chapter four is that it demonstrates that an abused woman can frame her experiences in such a way that their meanings are meanings that belong in Christian communities. However, it would still be easy for such an exercise to remain private, and so this chapter turned to look at the second half of the research question, addressing the issue of the voices of abused women speaking alongside other voices in Christian communities.

While it was possible in the last chapter to show how experiences of abuse can in fact be understood as having meanings that belong, and explore some of these meanings, this chapter has not presented a parallel task of exploring actual ways in which women who have been abused can be people who belong in Christian communities when the category of "Christian community" is limited to mean organised church structures. As argued above, while the movement of the churches is away from a state of silence and exclusion in relation to women who have been abused, and towards a state in which these women are beginning to be able to voice their experiences and perspectives alongside others, this movement is in its very early stages and has been slow. So while there is reason to hope that at some point it would be possible to reflect on the actual ways in which abused women are typically welcomed into churches, with their voices and experiences recognised as belonging alongside those of others, it is too soon to be able to attempt a reflection along these lines. While there are practices, prayers and liturgies that give voice to women who have been sexually abused, their use is rare and sporadic.[104] Their existence is reason for hope, but their scarcity in reality means that they cannot form the basis of an exploration of how women who have been abused are enabled towards belonging because of these practices.

[104] For example, *Time for Action* contains a chapter consisting of liturgies and materials for worship (pp.135-149), as does *The Courage to Tell* (pp.81-101). Pellauer, Chester and Boyajian, *Sexual Assault and Abuse* also suggests liturgies for this use (pp.225-247). Amelia O'Dea, *In a Place of Flame: Prayers for Survivors of Sexual Abuse* (Omaha: Creighton University Press, 1998) and Catherine Foote, *Survivor Prayers: Talking with God About Childhood Sexual Abuse* (Louiseville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994) are more personal, but (perhaps because of this) their content has more depth and is more thoughtful, careful, and sensitive than some of those liturgies designed for public use.

Chapter Six
Forgiveness and Justice in Christian Community

> Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.
>
> Luke 6:37

> Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow-servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.
> This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.
>
> Matthew 18:32-35

> Two groups of survivors on retreat were asked their views about forgiveness. They answered, 'fuck forgiveness.'[1]

Approaching the Subject of Forgiveness

In the previous chapter, I considered in a broad way the churches' responses to child sexual abuse, and how their responses function in relation to the question of how women who have been sexually abused can be people who belong in the churches. Having looked at the churches' slow recognition and response to abuse, I turned in the second half of the chapter to look at how the manner in which the churches speak about abuse, and aspects of worship and teaching in churches, may function to silence and exclude abused women further. In this chapter, I will narrow the focus from this broad look at churches' practices, to consider church teaching and practice with regard to one particular issue – I will look at interpretations, approaches and critiques of ways in which forgiveness has been understood in relation to childhood sexual abuse.

The decision to set aside a space for a discussion of forgiveness arises partly from the fact that it is a subject identified by churches as being in need of particular attention

[1] Margaret Kennedy, "Christianity and Child Sexual Abuse – Survivors Informing the Care of Children Following Abuse", paper given as part of study day on Spiritual Issues in Child Psychiatry at Royal College of Psychiatrists, London, 2003, p.7 (full text available at: http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/pdf/Margaret%20Kennedy%201.11.03%20Christianity%20and%20Child%20Sexual%20Abuse%20-%20Survivors%20informing%20the%20care%20of%20children%20following%20abuse.pdf)

and reflection. Part of my research involved conversations with heads of Safeguarding in four major denominations. During these conversations I asked each one to identify, from their perspective as the people working with issues of child sexual abuse and the handling of this issue in churches, topics or areas in which they considered theological reflection to be especially lacking or especially needed. They all named the topic of forgiveness. (They each named a number of topics, but forgiveness was the one area that all four identified as one in which further reflection was especially necessary.)[2]

While recognising the importance of addressing the subject of forgiveness, it has been the case though that because the origins and motivation behind the writing of this chapter differs from that of the rest of the thesis, the result is that the nature of its content and its style are quite different. The thesis as a whole originates from a desire to address a question that at its heart is deeply personal, whereas reflecting on the topic of forgiveness departs from this. Unlike the subjects explored in the rest of the thesis, forgiveness is not a subject that has been significant to my own experience, in either a positive or a negative way. Reflecting on the issue of forgiveness has taken me away from the grounding in experience that underpins and shapes the thesis, and has therefore been a very different process to the work carried out elsewhere in the thesis, and this is evident in the chapter. However, because of the identification of its importance by others working in this area, it was an issue that it was necessary to discuss.

In looking at the question of how forgiveness is understood in relation to childhood sexual abuse, what emerged as being significant in relation to my own research question was that speaking of forgiveness is one way in which Christian communities could speak about abuse in a language that is their own, but that doing so is not enough to secure a place of belonging in these communities for childhood sexual abuse. I have argued in previous chapters for the importance of abuse being spoken of and understood in terms that are part of the speech of Christian communities, so that these experiences are seen as having meanings that belong here. Speaking a language of forgiveness seems then one way in which Christian communities could do this. Speaking about abuse in relation to a theological concept and practice that sits at the heart of Christian community would seem a way of meeting this requirement.

[2] In informal conversations with church members and leaders, as well as with academics working in the subject of childhood sexual abuse, I also found that the issue of forgiveness was raised repeatedly as one that was especially problematic, and in need of further attention.

However, while this potential is there, in fact the content of what is so often said concerning forgiveness and abuse has quite the opposite effect. The way in which forgiveness has been spoken of in relation to childhood sexual abuse, far from welcoming these experiences into Christian communities, may well alienate them. While discussing in chapter five the issue of the experience of abuse spoken in church life, I mentioned two problems that occur in re-telling Biblical stories of sexual abuse – one problem being an absence of speech (when these stories are not told at all), and the other being the wrong kind of speech (when these stories are told without proper attention paid to the voices and experiences of the victims of abuse in these stories). So even if churches speak about abuse in terms that are very much part of the usual language of this place, if their words are not spoken carefully and thoughtfully then they facilitate exclusion rather than belonging.

A similar issue arose when looking at understandings and teachings of forgiveness – that while in theory speaking this language *should* locate experiences of childhood sexual abuse within Christian community, the details of what is often said means that what happens in practice is the opposite. A tendency to present forgiveness as something expected or even demanded from women who have been abused, a tendency to present forgiveness as something that is done privately, and a tendency to understand forgiveness in isolation from any engagement with the injustice of abuse, are all factors that feed into this, and each will be addressed in detail below.

Not surprisingly, given the identification by churches of forgiveness as an area most in need of thought and reflection, this subject receives particular attention in the literature produced by the churches, and in theological literature on child sexual abuse. The first section of the Church of England's child protection policy identifies the tension that the church faces between the gospel message of redemption and forgiveness, and the need for the church to recognise the very real ongoing danger posed to children by those who would hurt them.[3]

[3] *Protecting all God's Children: The Child Protection Policy for the Church of England*, 4th edition (London: Church House Publishing, 2010), p.2

The Methodist Church's Safeguarding policy identifies and explores the tension that the church faces between the gospel message of redemption and forgiveness, and is clear that any reduction of forgiveness to "forgive and forget" is both scripturally unsound and potentially dangerous in a pastoral situation. It is stressed that true forgiveness does not involve any pretence about the past, or ignoring what has happened, nor does it guarantee a person's future behaviour. The Methodist policy is critical of how forgiveness has been interpreted and practiced within the church in the past, acknowledging the damage that has been caused when the church's beliefs and practices concerning forgiveness have meant that children have not been protected from abuse,

> It is vital to recognise where the burden of relapse is carried. It is not carried by the church which has proclaimed what it terms 'forgiveness' but by the young child who has become the object of abuse in circumstances where the church ought to have been realistic and brave enough to do something about the situation.[4]

A similar acknowledgement is made in the CTBI publication *Time for Action*, which points out that over-simplistic and unrealistic church beliefs and teachings on forgiveness have played a significant part in offenders' finding in churches an easy location for the sexual abuse of both children and adults. The authors of this report, themselves members and representatives of a variety of Christian denominations, admit,

> We recognized that the Church's peculiar structure, their ethos of forgiving sin and not thinking badly of anyone, couple with the taboo on openness about sexuality and sexual activity, make them easy arenas for those who abuse in which to 'groom' their targets.[5]

In May 2007, the Church of Scotland's General Assembly requested that the Safeguarding Committee, in discussion with the church's Worship and Doctrine Task Group put together a working group whose remit was, "to discover a theology of forgiveness and proportionality related to sex offenders seeking to return to worship in congregations."[6] The resulting Forgiveness and Proportionality Working Group presented its report at the General Assembly of 2008. All this points to the fact that the churches see forgiveness as a particularly significant question when thinking through issues around the incidence of abuse and its aftermath.

---

[4] *Safeguarding: A Methodist response to the Codes of Practice of the Home Office and Scottish Office concerning the protection of children and young people* (London: Methodist Church, 2003), p.6

[5] Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, *Time for Action: Sexual abuse, the Churches and a New Dawn for Survivors* (London: Church House Publishing, 2002), p.14

[6] Joint Report of the Mission and Discipleship Council and the Safeguarding Committee Forgiveness and Proportionality Working Group, 2008, 1.1

Theological literature on child sexual abuse and family violence, and secondary literature on the churches' responses to abuse, also often devotes particular space to the issue of forgiveness because this topic, and the way the topic is handled by churches, is identified as causing particular pain and difficulty for victims of sexual abuse.[7] Margaret Kennedy, for example, argues that the way that forgiveness is so often taught and demanded by the churches, functions as a silencing factor on those who have been sexually abused. She writes,

> Survivors attending CSSA [Christian Survivors of Sexual Abuse] groups have expressed that *their greatest pain has been over the doctrine of forgiveness*. Here we, as professionals, need to be sure of our theological ground if we are not to facilitate further guilt and shame in the survivor, whether a child or adult.[8]

In this chapter, the task will be to consider teachings on forgiveness in relation to the central question of how past experiences of childhood sexual abuse may belong in Christian communities. I will be pointing out ways of speaking about forgiveness (and expecting others to speak about and practice forgiveness) that may aid this belonging, and others that may contribute to the isolation and exclusion of women who have been sexually abused. I will also point out ways in which the grammar of forgiveness, while giving these women a way of voicing the aftermath of abuse, gives them the wrong voice in the wrong way – forcing onto them a way of speaking about forgiveness that has not properly taken account of their circumstances.

In the first section, I will look at how forgiveness may be conceived of as a way for victims of sexual abuse to mend something that has been broken by experiences of sexual violence. Often overlapping with questions of healing, forgiveness may be thought of as the repair of a broken state or relationship, or as the restoration of a previous state or relationship. In the second section, I will consider how forgiveness can become an additional burden that is placed on a woman who has been abused. If she

---

[7] Marie Marshall Fortune, "Forgiveness: The Last Step", in *Violence in the Family: A Workshop Curriculum for Clergy and Other Helpers* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1991), pp.173-178; Chapter 7 Carolyn Holderread Heggen, "Repentance, Restitution, Forgiveness, and Reconciliation" in *Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes and Churches* (Scottdale, PA.; Waterloo, Ontario: Herald Press, 1993), pp.121-134; Pamela Cooper White, "Conclusion: The Call to Reconciliation" in, *The Cry of Tamar: Violence Against Women and the Church's Response (*Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), pp.253-262; Catherine Clark Kroeger and Nancy Nason-Clark, Chapter 9 "Repentance and Forgiveness" in, *No Place for Abuse: Biblical and Practical Resources to Counteract Domestic Violence* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 2001), pp.113-117

[8] Margaret Kennedy, "Christianity and Child Sexual Abuse – the Survivors' Voice Leading to Change", *Child Abuse Review* 9 (2000), p.131, emphasis added.

cannot, or will not, forgive her abuser, she may end up being the target for judgement, be blamed for her own lack of 'healing' or even for her abuser's conduct. In the third section, I will look at how a demand for forgiveness may end up silencing a prophetic voice for justice – whether that voice is the voice of those who have been abused, or whether that voice comes from those around her in the Christian community. In the fourth section, I will ask the question, whose interests does forgiveness serve? If a church expects and insists that abused women forgive their abusers, is this ultimately about the gospel, about the recovery of the victim, or about a church's discomfort with a woman who is upset, angry, and out of their control? In the fifth and final section, I will turn to raise questions about forgiveness and power, arguing that the way in which forgiveness tends to be understood theologically ignores the particular power dynamic between a victim and an abuser, and that it is contrary to the gospel to expect forgiveness in circumstances where this power dynamic has not been countered by justice.

Fixing Brokenness with Forgiveness

I have already characterised childhood sexual abuse as being an assault against who a person was created to be, with all that this kind of assault entails. In the face of such harm, the desire to fix people, to undo what was inflicted on them, can be strong. Martha Ramsey's account of her own experience conveys this, with her telling of how in the early years after her rape, her wish was for the harm that had been done to her to be undone. She writes about how she hoped for a restoration of the way she had been before the rape had happened,

> In a fairy tale a girl's feet are cut off by a giant, but at the end of the story after her many trials the fairies put them back on and she is as before. I brought this yearning to the rape, this wish and hope that I could be wholly restored by magic power.[9]

This desire for a return to a previous state can also feed into understandings of forgiveness that are presented to women who have been abused. Forgiveness may be seen as a repairing of something that has been damaged or broken, whether that is a broken relationship between two people, a broken relationship between the offender and God, or the brokenness inflicted on the person who has been hurt. In literature on child

[9] Martha Ramsey, *Where I Stopped: Remembering an Adolescent Rape* (San Diego; New York; London: Harvest, 1995), p.93

sexual abuse, all of these aspects of an interpretation of forgiveness as repair, return, restoration, can be seen. This interpretation of forgiveness is strongly criticised elsewhere in the literature for being naïve, inappropriate, and potentially dangerous.

Mending personal brokenness

One way that the desire for restoration can be understood places it as the removal of something that sexual abuse has left on or in the person who has been abused. Martha Ramsey's account presents her understanding of in these terms, with her wondering whether the "sense of invasion" she feels could be "drawn out of the child, sung out, like pulling out a great psychic splinter?"[10] Forgiveness can also be seen to be interpreted in terms similar to this – as restoration, cleansing, renewing, on an internal and private level. Paula Sandford, in her book *Healing Victims of Sexual Abuse*, presents an example of a ritual of forgiveness involving a woman who had been sexually abused. After praying for this woman, Ginnie, to be forgiven for the sin of not wanting to have sex with her husband, those praying with her then ask for her to be cleansed, using the words, "Lord Jesus, thank you that you are washing Ginnie clean right now. Let the rivers of your living water flow over and through her, carrying away all the filth of defilement."[11] Forgiveness is connected to a cleansing water washing her "as white as snow"[12], so that all trace of the impact of the rape is removed.

This kind of understanding of forgiveness as wiping clean or removing some sort of internal blot can be heavily criticised on a number of levels. The suggestion that forgiveness function to wipe out the effects of abuse effectively denies the nature and depth of those effects, as well as denying them any possible place, role, or significance by announcing that the only thing to be done with them is to eliminate them. Margaret Arms points out that the wounds carried by people who have been abused are not of the sort that can be wiped away, and that to try to do so is to deny the depth of the harm that has been caused. Arms references Jeremiah's speaking of God's anger against those who "dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. 'Peace, Peace,' they say, when there is no peace" (6:14), and claims that the way that forgiveness is taught and

[10] Ramsey, *Where I Stopped*, p.197
[11] Paula Sandford, *Healing Victims of Sexual Abuse* (Hatfield: Van Schaik, 2000), p.47
[12] Sandford, *Healing Victims of Sexual Abuse*, p.47

practiced may have the same function, "at times to forgive is to heal the wounds of God's abused people lightly."[13]

The promotion of forgiveness as "a kind of spiritual eraser"[14] can cause significant distress to people who have been abused, telling them that the upset they feel is something we should try to make vanish, rather than seeing it as appropriate and even helpful in identifying the significance of what has happened. It amounts to saying that a person with the feelings and thoughts that very naturally and appropriately result from childhood sexual abuse are of no value in a Christian community, and are to be replaced with a person who exhibits no signs or any abuse having been perpetrated. While this may be done with the very best of intentions, nevertheless it pressurises those who have been abused to use forgiveness as the tool to erase what has happened. Jeanette Gosney's booklet, *Surviving Childhood Sexual Abuse: Supporting Adults in the Church*, looks at how Christian beliefs in "laying everything at the foot of the cross", leaving it there and moving on from it, can be the cause of further guilt and pain to people who have been sexually abused. Like Arms, she argues that the harm caused by abuse is not the kind that can be deposited somewhere and forgotten about, as she also says people may find themselves pushed to do by those who remind them of the value of Philippians 3:13 - "forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead." These teachings, which she has observed taken out of context and presented to people who have been sexually abused as the way they should be moving on from their experiences of abuse, only highlights their inadequacies and sets them apart from those who are living as more faithful Christians. As long as they do not erase those feelings that have no place in this community, they are not acceptable, "the overall message they hear and absorb often confirms for them their failure as disciples of Christ."[15]

The idea of forgiveness as addressing personal brokenness is significant in literature that connects forgiveness with the healing of the person who forgives. Forgiveness can be thought of as the means to achieving emotional wholeness and recovery, as serving a therapeutic function. Leah Coulter, for example, claims that

---

[13] Margaret F. Arms, "When Forgiveness Is Not the Issue in Forgiveness: Religious Complicity in Abuse and Privatized Forgiveness", in Marie Marshall Fortune and Joretta Marshall (eds.), *Forgiveness and Abuse: Jewish and Christian Reflections* (New York: Haworth Press, 2002), p.112

[14] Arms, "When Forgiveness Is Not the Issue in Forgiveness", p.114

[15] Jeanette Gosney, *Surviving Childhood Sexual Abuse: Supporting Adults in the Church* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2002), pp.11-12

forgiveness plays an important part in the "healing process" from childhood sexual abuse.[16] Pamela Cooper-White's chapter on reconciliation in her book *The Cry of Tamar*, situates forgiveness as part of the process of healing from abuse. She sees forgiveness as a "letting go" of rage and hatred, and a movement forward "with a new lightness of breath and of step."[17] Forgiveness is practiced as "a step toward wholeness for the survivor."[18] Christine Clegg, writing about Sylvia Fraser's *My Father's House*, notices a strong relation in Fraser's book between forgiveness and cure of distress. Citing Fraser's words on forgiveness towards the close of *My Father's House*, "emotional health often requires the abused to forgive the abuser"[19], and reviewing Fraser's process of forgiving her abuser, Clegg summarises, "Forgiveness is invested here with an amazing power to cure, and survival appears to depend on it."[20]

As well as the therapeutic value attributed to the act of forgiving perpetrators, another act that can be seen as helping people who have been abused to move forward in emotional recovery is that of self-forgiveness. Cooper-White devotes a section of her chapter on reconciliation to looking at the issue of self-forgiveness. She begins by citing Ellen Bass and Laura Davis' book *The Courage to Heal*, in which they are critical of anyone who puts pressure on those who have been abused to forgive their abusers, but argue for the value of self-forgiveness,

> The only forgiveness that is essential is for yourself. You must forgive yourself for having needed, for having been small. You must forgive yourself for coping the best you could...You must forgive yourself for the limitations you've lived with as an adult...You must forgive yourself for needing time to heal now, and you must give yourself, as generously as you can, all your compassion and understanding, so you can direct your attention and energy toward your own healing. *This* forgiveness is what's essential.[21]

Cooper-White supports their arguments, saying that self-forgiveness can help in moving away from self-blame and can also signify a person's taking responsibility for her own recovery.[22]

---

[16] Leah Coulter, "A Pastoral Theology for the Sinned Against: Adult Christian Women Sexually Abused as Children", *American Journal of Pastoral Counselling* 3, no.3 (2001), p.194
[17] Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar*, p.259
[18] Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar*, p.259
[19] Sylvia Fraser, *My Father's House: A Memoir of Incest and of Healing* (London: Viagro, 1999), p.252
[20] Christine Clegg, "Feminist Recoveries in 'My Father's House'", *Feminist Review* no.61 (1999), p.76
[21] Ellen Bass and Laura Davis, *The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse* (London: Vermilion, 2002), p.154
[22] Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar*, p.258

Carolyn Holderread Heggen also emphasises the importance of self-forgiveness, saying, "And important step in the forgiveness process is for a victim to forgive herself for the things she may have done which were perhaps painful and destructive but were a means of coping with the abuse."[23] She sees this self-forgiveness as the means to move beyond self-blame and personal guilt that are connected to having been sexual abused.

Heggen's thoughts on self-forgiveness come under a heading "What Forgiveness Is"[24] (following a section on "What Forgiveness Isn't"), and the section opens by looking briefly at forgiveness in Old and New Testament texts. Then, Heggen, herself a Christian psychotherapist, points out that the power of forgiveness has such that "even nonreligous self-help circles" are now emphasising its importance as "a way to heal the self and a damaged relationship."[25] While self-forgiveness may have the power to "heal the self", when it is recommended by Christian writers for this, or any, reason, it seems that the interpretation of forgiveness by secular self-help circles may be what is influencing these writers more than their own traditions are. The notion of self-forgiveness may have value as a psychotherapeutic tool, but is without any Christian theological content.

When forgiveness is understood in these ways – of forgiveness of perpetrator or of self as having therapeutic value – I suspect that what is being advocated is not truly forgiveness, but is better described as 'coming to terms with'. Those things that are suggested as being cause for self-forgiveness have been listed by those authors cited above as: needing time to heal, having been small, having limitations, and trying to cope with the abuse. None of these things is in any way an act of wrongdoing, and as such forgiveness is simply the wrong word to use to describe what is to be done. It is a mistake to think of women who have been sexually abused as being in need of an emotional repair that can be achieved using forgiveness as a tool either to remove all evidence of the abuse (as if this is possible or desirable) or to comfort and heal.

[23] Heggen, *Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes and Churches*, p.130
[24] Heggen, *Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes and Churches*, p.129
[25] Heggen, *Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes and Churches*, p.130

Mending relational brokenness

As well as being seen as a means to achieving the goal of inner restoration, forgiveness can also be thought of as helping those who have been abused towards a restoration of broken relationships – a goal which is as mistaken as that of inner restoration, but potentially far more dangerous. In a paper in which he sets out to dispel myths of forgiveness, Dan Allender makes the statement, "true forgiveness…means hungering for restoration."[26] He understands this hungering for restoration as the desire for reconciliation and renewed relationship between the offender and the victim, and reconciliation and renewed relationship between the offender and God. He argues that forgiveness should be offered with a "deep desire for the offender to be restored to God and to the one who was harmed."[27] Reconciliation of these relationships is, according to Allender, to be understood as "restored peace, true shalom, wholeness and health returned to something that was broken and diseased."[28]

Carolyn Holderread Heggen, in her chapter on forgiveness in her book *Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes and Churches*, also understands forgiveness in these same terms of restored relationship between victims and offenders, arguing that this broken relationship impacts negatively not just on those immediately involved, but also on the wider Christian community. Heggen writes,

> Reconciliation between victims and their offenders is surely an important and desirable goal, particularly when both are believers and members of the same congregation. As long as the relationship remains broken, not only are the key participants' lives affected, but also those of their families, the congregation, and the broader Christian community. Thus, victims and offenders should be encouraged to work toward restored relationship. [29]

When presenting a picture of what this reconciliation of broken relationships looks like, Heggen writes, "The angels in heaven must surely do cartwheels of ecstatic joy when two people who have been estranged and isolated in their pain embrace in love, reconciliation, and renewed relationship."[30]

---

[26] Dan B. Allender, "'Forgive and Forget' and Other Myths of Forgiveness", in Lisa Barnes Lampman and Michelle D. Shattuck (eds.), *God and the Victim: Theological Reflections on Evil, Victimization, Justice, and Forgiveness* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1999), p.207
[27] Allender, "'Forgive and Forget' and Other Myths of Forgiveness", p.213
[28] Allender, "'Forgive and Forget' and Other Myths of Forgiveness", p.211
[29] Heggen, *Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes and Churches*, p.123
[30] Heggen, *Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes and Churches*, p.134

In advocating the return to a previous state or relationship, there is the danger of ignoring the fact that it was in this previous state or relationship that the abuse took place. There must have therefore been something terribly wrong with this state or relationship to begin with, which raises the question of why the restoration of this state or relationship would be considered positive or desired? Simply returning the people concerned to a state that existed prior to the abuse involves ignoring all the features of that relationship that gave rise to the abuse being perpetrated. Allender's view that forgiveness must involve the desire for reconciliation, and that reconciliation is the restoration of peace, wholeness and health to something "that was broken and diseased", denies the possibility that in fact it may have been this previous relationship and situation in which abuse took place, and which he is advocating a return to, that is best described as "broken and diseased". A broken relationship between a child and an abuser may well be the best kind of relationship in the circumstances, and 'fixing' this relationship into one that is 'whole' would be a sign of something very wrong. The brokenness may in fact be the healthiest feature of the relationship.

The teaching of forgiveness as a means of fixing something that is broken – whether that is something internal to a woman who has been abused or whether it is the restoration of the broken relationship between that woman and her abuser – says much about a community's need for a certain kind of order between and within its members. It reveals a community's desire for 'peace' where peace is understood as an absence of pain or conflict. But the advocating of forgiveness to fulfil this need pushes women who have been sexually abused to the outskirts of Christian community, or even outside it altogether. Those incapable or unwilling to speak this vocabulary of a facade of peace that attempts to conceal or erase wrongdoing find themselves shunned when the inauthentic peace is translated as forgiveness, and is seen as essential in the life of each and every Christian. It is one more way of speaking in the aftermath of abuse that could well have the effect of making it even more difficult for experiences of abuse to belong in Christian community.

Forgiveness as a Burden

I will now turn to look at how women who have been sexually abused in childhood may experience the expectation from those around them that they should

forgive their abusers, as an additional burden to those they already carry. The reasons for others' desire for an abused woman to forgive may be well-intentioned – they may stem from connections made between forgiveness and healing – or they may stem from particular understandings about biblical teachings on forgiveness and the role of forgiveness in the Christian life. Whatever the reasons, when forgiveness is expected from a person – particularly a person who has been abused – there is a real danger of her being burdened with a yoke that she struggles to carry and which feeds into her silence concerning the hurts she also carries.

Unforgiveness and blame

One way in which forgiveness becomes a burden on women who have been abused is when it is seen either as a manifestation of faith or as a choice that is rationally made, entailing that 'unforgiveness' is the outcome either of a lack of faith or a deliberate choice made by a woman who does not want to move on from a place of anger or hurt. This way of thinking about forgiveness means that the responsibility for forgiveness is placed on the woman who has been hurt, and she risks being judged or blamed for her lack of forgiveness.

Margaret Kennedy, in the context of discussing Christian teaching on forgiveness as a silencing factor for victims of abuse, gives as an the example a letter sent to a woman in contact with CSSA (Christian Survivors of Sexual Abuse), who had been sexually abused by her brother in childhood and by an Anglican priest to whom she had gone to for help as an adult. The letter, sent to this woman from an evangelical Christian friend, reads,

> I have always felt you will never find real peace of mind until you forgive, and forgive in the way God forgave us, in that while we were sinners, Christ died for us. My desire is only for you to receive full healing of your mind and spirit, if not your body. I believe God loves you infinitely more than I do, and longs to bring you to healing. I guess only you and He knows what prevents it. I will continue to pray for you, that God will reveal His truth to you and show you his love.[31]

As Kennedy points out, this letter is full of judgement on the abused woman, suggesting that there is something about her that prevents her healing, and linking this to

[31] Kennedy, "Christianity and Child Sexual Abuse – the Survivors' Voice Leading to Change", pp.133-134

her not having forgiven adequately, "in the way God forgave us". The writer offers no sense of outrage at the abuse that has been perpetrated either by the brother or by the priest, simply recommending forgiveness as the means to peace of mind. Kennedy comment on the letter, "There is no awareness of trauma. There is a simple solution...forgive. She is blamed for her own lack of healing."[32]

Blaming the victim for her lack of forgiveness is also seen in Heather Pinks' paper on self-mutilation and Christian spirituality.[33] Pinks argues that people who injure themselves do so as a manifestation of the need, as they perceive it, to pass judgement and exact punishment on themselves to be sinners. She sees this as a result of "self-injurers'" lack of foundational trust in the acceptance of God and God's freely given justification. The consequence, as Pinks sees it: "It is impossible for those who engage in self-harm, by doling out judgment and punishment to themselves, to ever attain the cleansing affects of forgiveness that only the Infinite can truly bestow."[34]

Both Pinks, and the woman cited by Kennedy, seem confused about the role of God in a person's forgiveness of one who hurt them. While Pinks apparently sees forgiveness as something that can be truly bestowed only by God, nevertheless she sees unfaithful self-mutilating behaviour as a barrier to God's grace. Kennedy's letter-writer thinks that while God longs to see this woman brought to full forgiveness and healing, there is something blame-worthy about her that prevents this from happening. In both cases, the result is that an abused woman who does not forgive, and who perhaps hurts her body in the midst of her pain, is cast as being in opposition to the will of God (as well as strangely powerful in standing in the way of the will of God). Lack of faith and lack of knowledge of the truth are seen as the factors preventing forgiveness.

As well as unforgiveness as a lack of faith is the issue of forgiveness or unforgiveness being thought of as the result of an act of will. Understood in this way, unforgiveness becomes something that can be conceived of as a willful rejection of a choice or attitude that is thought of as normative. Peter Horsfield, in his paper "Forgiving Abuse – An Ethical Critique" argues that embedded in the belief in the

[32] Kennedy, "Christianity and Child Sexual Abuse – the Survivors' Voice Leading to Change", p.134
[33] Heather Pinks, "Self-Mutilation: A Spiritual Endeavor", *The Journal of Pastoral Care and Counseling* 57, no.4 (2003), pp.447-458
[34] Pinks, "Self-Mutilation: A Spiritual Endeavor", p.453

primacy of forgiveness as the Christian response to wrongdoing is what he terms "a strongly rationalist or cognitive expectation that a woman who has been sexually abused should be able simply to decide by an act of conscious choice to forget she has been assaulted and carry on her life."[35] This teaching carries with it the conclusion that a sexually abused woman who has not forgiven her abuser is deliberately choosing not to, leading to the construction of "'unforgiveness' as deviance."[36]

As if people who have been abused did not carry enough burdens, or enough guilt already, they face having yet more heaped onto their shoulders by those who may genuinely believe themselves to be helping, but who try to push them towards forgiveness as if all that is necessary for forgiveness to be 'achieved' is for the wounded person to 'just try harder'. Ellen Bass and Laura Davis, although not writing from a faith perspective, address the topic of forgiveness, and in doing so make the point that forgiveness is not something that can be achieved by sheer effort. Put simply, "No one forgives by trying."[37]

The same point is made by a number of Christian feminist writers in relation to victims of sexual abuse, and is then developed in their own frameworks. Broadly, two points tend to be made about blaming an abused woman for not forgiving her abuser, and the two are necessarily linked. The first concerns the theological problems associated with insisting that a person forgive, as if it is entirely up to her. Marie Marshall Fortune argues that although forgiveness is a wilful act, a person cannot just decide "I will forgive", as if there is nothing more to it.[38] She sees forgiveness, should it take place, as the result of God's grace "which is known through prayer and the presence of the Holy Spirit" empowering a victim of abuse.[39] To hold that forgiveness is only an act of will is to remove God from the picture, and reduce forgiveness to a deliberate psychological process that has little input from anywhere besides the hurt person's cognitive efforts.

The second point is concerned with the insensitivity of insisting that an abused woman forgive her abuser. Pamela Cooper-White warns that women who have been

[35] Peter Horsfield, "Forgiving Abuse – An Ethical Critique" in Fortune and Marshall (eds.), *Forgiveness and Abuse: Jewish and Christian Reflections* (New York: Haworth Press, 2002) , p.54
[36] Horsfield, "Forgiving Abuse – An Ethical Critique", p.55
[37] Bass and Davis, *The Courage to Heal*, p.151
[38] Marie Marshall Fortune, *Sexual Violence: The Unmentionable Sin* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1984), p.208
[39] Fortune, *Sexual Violence: The Unmentionable Sin*, p.210

victimised by any kind of violence are often traumatised further by people to believe that if she just tried hard enough, she could forgive, with the implication that if she has not forgiven, it is because she is not trying hard enough. Such counsel, she argues, often dooms abused women to failure, with all the destruction that comes with it, "If the survivor tries to forgive, she can only fail, and her failure will reinforce all the self-blame and shame of her original abuse."[40]

A further way in which unforgiveness carries with it blame on a woman who has been abused, is when forgiveness is connected not just to her own healing, but to that of her abuser too. Kennedy argues that teaching that healing (both the healing of a woman who has been abused, and the healing of her abuser) is conditional on her forgiving him, is a way of "reinforcing the guilt and holding a carrot to forgive."[41] She also raises the danger of a view that sees healing of an abuser as following from forgiveness, since this can lead to a Christian community's believing that an abuser should be welcomed back in – if he has been forgiven by the person he abused, then he is renewed and restored to right relationship, "for by this forgiveness, he too is healed."[42]

Of course, most literature on forgiveness is not written with the specific circumstance of childhood sexual abuse in mind. The particular and extreme nature of this situation highlights flaws in that literature, raising as it does issues which may not have seemed especially problematic until considered in this situation.[43] Trudi Govier writes, "One who forgives will help in the fresh start by offering a wrongdoer the opportunity to begin anew, allowing that better acts and a brighter future are possible, and supporting restored status and relationships."[44] This seems to imply that if the wronged person does not offer the wrongdoer the opportunity to begin anew, the wrongdoer cannot do so. Such a view binds together the victim and perpetrator of abuse on two sides of a transaction, which in the case of childhood sexual abuse is especially inappropriate. In the case of child sexual abuse, expecting the person who has been

[40] Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar*, p.253
[41] Kennedy, "Christianity and Child Sexual Abuse – the Survivors' Voice Leading to Change", p.133
[42] Kennedy, "Christianity and Child Sexual Abuse – the Survivors' Voice Leading to Change", p.133
[43] The situation of childhood sexual abuse is of course not the only issue to do this. Some flaws in literature on forgiveness may be revealed when a theoretical understanding of forgiveness is placed in any one of a number of situations in which forgiveness is expected to be practiced. Others will be revealed by particular situations, when the details of those situations highlight particular flaws either in theoretical understandings of forgiveness, or understandings of forgiveness that have not taken into account the features of particular situations in which the question of forgiveness is relevant.
[44] Trudy Govier, *Forgiveness and Revenge* (London; New York: Routledge, 2002), p.44

abused to forgive her abuser in order to enable him to act on the possibility for reform that her forgiveness has offered him, is to ask of her something beyond appropriate or even safe. It is not difficult to see it leading to the abused woman's being blamed if her abuser's conduct does not change – it is her 'unforgiveness' that is preventing his reform.

Teaching that requires a person who has been greatly wronged to feel compassion and a will for redemption towards a wrongdoer is a demanding teaching in most any circumstances, but this fact does not indicate that the teaching is incorrect. However, in the case of childhood sexual abuse it is not just that what is being asked of women who have been abused is demanding or difficult, it is that the demand made of them is inappropriate. Beyond just requiring that those who have been wronged must forgive, Dan Allender argues that this forgiveness must be offered in precisely the right way and with the purest of motivations. He writes, "It is the passionate desire for reconciliation that enables us to offer true forgiveness. Forgiveness that is offered without the deep desire for the offender to be restored to God and to the one who was harmed is at best antiseptic and mechanical. At worst, it is pharisaical self-righteousness."[45] Expecting a woman sexually abused often over a period of years to feel a "passionate desire for reconciliation", and a "deep desire" for the restoration of the offender to God and the victim is hideous. Calling "self-righteous" any person who does not forgive with these motivations again heaps blame right back on the person who deserves it the least.

One point to make about the weight of the burden being put onto women who have been abused is that it does seem at times that forgiveness is being confused with what would more accurately be called absolution. Allender's characterisation of the motivation for forgiveness strays into a confusion between the two. Even if a person wronged by an offender were to forgive the offender for whichever specific wrong(s) committed against her, this would not constitute the offender's reconciliation and restoration to God. Allender continues, "Further, a forgiving heart does not wait passively for repentance to occur. Instead, it offers the offender a taste of mercy and strength intended to expose and destroy sin."[46] He is in danger here of allocating to the victim of abuse a power and responsibility that rightly belongs to God. It is not the place

[45] Allender, "'Forgive and Forget' and Other Myths of Forgiveness", p.213
[46] Allender, "'Forgive and Forget' and Other Myths of Forgiveness", p.213

of a person who has been wronged to expose and destroy sin by showing mercy to her offender, or to effect his restoration to God. Carolyn Holderread Heggen writes,

> The victim of abuse does not forgive the offender so his heart is made pure, his record made clean. This is neither her responsibility nor in her power. Absolution for sin is something only God can extend…To put pressure on a victim to absolve her abuser is not only cruel and insensitive, it is also bad theology.[47]

A woman who has been sexually abused and who does not forgive her abuser may well find herself on the receiving end of judgement and blame from the Christian community – a community that may well not have stopped to consider whether what it expects of its members is in fact appropriate for all people in all circumstances, or indeed whether it is really appropriate for anyone at any time. It could be that the case of childhood sexual abuse highlights faulty teachings on forgiveness that are not so obvious in less extreme circumstances.

Unforgiveness, rejection and exclusion

Another aspect of the burden placed on abused women by Christian communities who push for them to forgive their abusers, is that these women face alienation from those communities if they do not, or cannot, comply with the perceived requirement to forgive. Far from being a place in which these women can belong, a Christian community can become a place in which these women find themselves shunned unless they comply with the community's push for forgiveness. In these circumstances, forgiveness is likely to become something that women who have been abused feel they must do if they are to belong. The risk of rejection from their own communities has been identified as a reason for women's wanting to forgive quickly.[48]

In a community that sets the value of the family and the value of forgiveness at the heart of the Christian life, those with past experiences that cast both these things in a very different light are a threat to values, and in practice these values can become more important than the people involved in their practice. In chapter four, I discussed the danger of the Christian family being an idol to which abused children may be sacrificed

[47] Heggen, *Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes and Churches*, p.127
[48] See Kennedy, "Christianity and Child Sexual Abuse – the Survivors' Voice Leading to Change", p.127 and Horsfield, "Forgiving Abuse – An Ethical Critique", p.58

if admitting the occurrence of abuse in the family threatens the value that a Christian community wants to place on family. It is possible to see forgiveness functioning with a similar status, so that those who do not behave in a way that honours this status are excluded from the community of those who do.

Peter Horsfield argues that there is a tendency in Christian communities for forgiveness to be presented as "the proactive of every Christian as a means of participating in the mission of God."[49] This idea was apparent in the letter quoted from in the previous section, in which a sexually abused woman was pressed to "forgive in the way God forgave us."[50] Those promoting this view have scriptures they use to make their argument. After all, they may say, we are required to forgive others so that we may be forgiven, "For if you forgive others when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins" (Matt. 6:14-15).

If God forgives those who forgive others, then an unforgiving person situates herself outside the forgiveness of God and certainly outside a community that prizes the virtue of forgiveness as an entry requirement to the community of faith. What does not enter into this calculation is that the cost of entry under these terms will be far higher for some than for others. Sheila Redmond discusses the dangers of forgiveness being taught to children as a Christian virtue without proper attention being paid to the particular circumstances in which some children live.[51] Redmond argues that the value attributed to forgiveness (particularly on forgiveness too soon) impedes articulations of rage and hatred against the facts of the abuse and the powerlessness of the child who was abused – articulations which are an important part of recovery from abuse.[52]

Forgiveness as a means of situating oneself in the economy of God's relationship with humanity runs the same danger highlighted in the previous section, that the forgiveness expected from a person who has been abused is of a nature that really only

[49] Horsfield, "Forgiving Abuse – An Ethical Critique", p.55
[50] Kennedy, "Christianity and Child Sexual Abuse – the Survivors' Voice Leading to Change", p.133
[51] Sheila Redmond, "Christian 'Virtues' and Recovery from Child Sexual Abuse" in Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn (eds.), *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989), pp.75-76. Redmond also looks at four other virtues she identifies as being taught to children – the value of suffering, the necessity of sexual purity (particularly for girls), the knowledge of the need for personal redemption, and the value placed on children's obedience to authority figures – and discusses each in turn from the point of view of a Christian child who has been sexually assaulted by a person known to them.
[52] Redmond, "Christian 'Virtues' and Recovery from Child Sexual Abuse", p.73

belongs to God. One aspect of this is that people who have been abused may well be expected to forgive their abusers regardless of whether the abuser has shown any repentance or remorse for his actions. Annie Imbens and Ineke Jonker observe this from their own research on the experiences reported by women who have been sexually abused. They write, "Victims are often told by those in their immediate surroundings, as well as by their priests or ministers, that they are obligated to forgive the offenders unconditionally."[53] Horsfield, too, notes that forgiveness of abuser by the person he abused is all too often thought to be unconditional, when this is not the case.[54]

The isolation and alienation already likely experienced by a woman who was sexually abused in childhood can only be intensified by those around her pushing her to 'let it go', forgive him, and 'move on'. Desperate to belong, a woman faced with the pressure of being excluded from a community that sees itself (as the community of a forgiving God) as embodying the virtue of forgiveness, will be wise to remain silent about the hurt and resentment she continues to harbour towards her abuser and against those who failed to protect or help her, "Knowing these pressures to forgive, they are *less likely* to disclose their abuse experience; particularly within their Christian homes or communities."[55] The need to have a place of belonging within the Christian community may well override the need to speak the truth, so she remains silent.

<u>The abusive practice of forgiveness</u>

In the light of the judgement and blame heaped onto a woman who does not forgive, the details of what is expected from her as she forgives, and the pressure resulting from a fear of exclusion from community and relationships she very much needs, the argument can be made that the practice of forgiveness may well itself be abusive, both with regard to what it is understood as entailing, and with regard to the coercion involved in her coming to a point at which she forgives (or at least claims to forgive).

[53] Annie Imbens and Ineke Jonker, *Christianity and Incest*, trans. Patricia McVay (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), pp.236
[54] Horsfield, "Forgiving Abuse – An Ethical Critique", p.56
[55] Kennedy, "Christianity and Child Sexual Abuse – the Survivors' Voice Leading to Change", p.134

Looking at these two issues in turn, forgiveness may be abusive for the person who forgives when it is understood as involving acts, mindsets, processes that are reminiscent of the dynamics at work in an abusive relationship. I touched on this in the previous sections when discussing the issue of a woman who has been sexually abused then extending forgiveness to her abuser for the sake of his restoration, healing, well-being. The mechanics of forgiveness can also be understood as an act of self-giving on the part of the person who forgives. Dan Allender cites what he sees as a positive insight from a forum participant who stated, "I don't think there is ultimate forgiveness unless I come to the place where I am willing to give away a piece of myself on behalf of the other."[56] Taken in the context of child sexual abuse, to expect someone who has been sexually abused to "give away a piece of herself" on behalf of her abuser is to ask her to do willingly that which her abuser has already been inflicting on her by force.

This idea of childhood sexual abuse involving a fundamental theft from the child, extending to a theft of self, is seen in Rebecca Parker's account. Parker recounts her experience of returning as an adult to the neighbourhood in which she lived as a child. Standing in front of the house that her abuser had lived in at the time, and where the abuse had taken place, she kneels on the ground and takes a handful of earth which she takes away with her. As she does this, she thinks to herself, "I'm taking this from you...I'm taking your ground because of everything you took from me."[57] Expecting a person who has already experienced part of herself being taken from her by her abuser, then to make the decision to give him another "piece" of herself, is to ask her to enter into a transaction that she has experienced as traumatic, and with the very person who inflicted it on her in the first place.

A similar issue is raised by Eamonn Conway's essay on child sexual abuse and the response of the church.[58] Writing as a Catholic priest and teacher in Ireland, and writing with specific reference to the abuse crisis in the Catholic Church in Ireland, Conway discusses what forgiveness means for a person who was abused. He writes, "To forgive is to decide that the person who has offended will not define or limit the extent of

[56] Bill O'Brian, cited in Allender, "'Forgive and Forget' and Other Myths of Forgiveness", p.210
[57] Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), p.184
[58] Eamonn Conway, "The Service of a Different Kingdom: Child Sexual Abuse and the Response of the Church", in Conway et al (eds.), *The Church and Child Sexual Abuse* (Dublin: Columba Press, 1999), pp.76-90

my graciousness and self-giving."[59] While self-giving may well be a very positive thing generally speaking, far more care needs to be taken when discussing this with specific reference to people who have been abused, since their past experience may well be one of self-theft (as was discussed in chapter four). Even if a person who has been abused can practice self-giving in a positive way, if self-giving is seen as an element of forgiveness, then the implication is that the recipient of this gift of self is the abuser. If self-giving is thought of as being involved in forgiveness, it is necessary to think about the nuances of different human relationships and to ask whether it is right to ask for the same from everyone in relation to everyone.

The second way in which the practice of forgiveness can be abusive when carried out by women who have been abused is that, on top of the inappropriate content or dynamics of forgiveness, the process of arriving at a point of forgiveness may have involved far too much coercion to be considered healthy or appropriate. Frederick Keene states that it is in cases of child sexual abuse that "the question of relative power is at its starkest, and where the church commonly sides with the abuser and bludgeons the survivor with a doctrine of premature forgiveness."[60]

This issue of relative power, as well as being especially stark in a case of child sexual abuse, is also very stark between a woman who has been abused and the church that tells her what actions she should take in relation to forgiveness. This contrast of power is manifest in numerical terms – there are likely more people advocating forgiveness than there are women for whom it is simply not a good option. It is also manifest in terms of status – those teaching doctrine and its practice in Christian communities have particular power in those communities, and women who have been abused are especially vulnerable.

That those in positions of pastoral authority may – knowingly or unwittingly – misuse their power poses a potential danger to all those to whom they preach, but the same danger carries less or more threat to different individuals depending on their past experiences. So a pastor who preaches "blanket forgiveness" does a disservice to her or

[59] Conway, "The Service of a Different Kingdom", p.85
[60] Frederick W. Keene, "Structures of Forgiveness in the New Testament" in Carol J. Adams and Marie Marshall Fortune (eds.), *Violence Against Women and Children: A Christian Theological Sourcebook* (New York: Continuum, 1995), p.131

his entire congregation, but s/he does a particular disservice to those who are most likely to be intimidated by this; those who are most likely to have it result in guilt and shame. For these people, as Margaret Arms writes, "Pressured forgiveness becomes yet another in a long list of experienced coercion."[61]

Arms argues that religious communities, in their pushing forgiveness onto people who have been abused, need to be far more aware of the dynamics involved in abusive relationships, and consequently far more careful when addressing issues of forgiveness with a group of people with varied experiences, such as happens in preaching to a congregation. Without detailed and sophisticated understandings of the occurrence and nature of abuse and its effects, it is easy for religious leaders and teachers to preach forgiveness in a way that traumatises listeners further. Arms argues that simply to insist on forgiveness in a general or blanket manner, as a good thing – the 'Christian' thing – to be done, they may be misusing their authority. She writes,

> If a pastor uses the power of the pulpit or religious doctrine to insist that we must all forgive without careful and contextual exploration of the process, at the least he or she exhibits insensitivity to those who have been abused and at worst engages in power abuse.[62]

Pushing onto an abused woman the obligation to forgive her abuser, and potentially the complicit community around her as well, can only exacerbate what is likely already a guilt-ridden existence. Living with the experience of having been abused, an inability or a refusal to forgive becomes one more secret to be kept from a community that champions the forgiveness of sin. Pressurising an abused woman to forgive her abuser places on her a burden that is unacceptable to place on any person, but is all the more inappropriate in the case of a person whose very injury is the result of coercion. To have such a burden placed upon those who are already living with the impact of abuse cannot be a feature of an authentic manifestation of the community of God, if part of coming to Jesus is a relieving of the burdens of those who are weary (Matt. 11:28-30). If the act of forgiveness is central to the Christian faith, yet is experienced as a further burden for those who are weary, then something has gone wrong in the understanding or the communication of this act.

[61] Arms, "When Forgiveness Is Not the Issue in Forgiveness", p.119
[62] Arms, "When Forgiveness Is Not the Issue in Forgiveness", p.118

Whose Interests does Forgiveness Serve?

> The connection between personal and social sin has been 'split at the root' so that the church can preach love of neighbor and yet confirm the social status quo that perpetuates oppression.
>
> Letty Russell[63]

That connections are often made between forgiveness and healing (as discussed above) might suggest that the church, in expecting abused women to forgive their abusers, might have these women's wellbeing as their motivation. It is also the case though that in the aftermath of abuse, when the victim of abuse may be upset, angry, and essentially 'high maintenance', if she can be pushed to move on and leave these so-called negative emotions behind, this makes life significantly easier for those who otherwise might be expected to walk through such a difficult period of her life. In this section, I will think about how an expectation on victims of abuse that they forgive their abusers is a teaching which, if followed, means that the church can avoid both the intense emotional burden brought about by both victims and perpetrators of child sexual abuse, as well as avoiding having to confront the theological and social challenges raised by abuse.

Forgiveness as avoidance

In chapter two I argued that the practice of psychiatric diagnosis can be seen as a form of avoidance – avoidance of painful emotional engagement with the reality of childhood sexual abuse and its impact, and avoidance of the requirement to recognise and begin to address those social and political structures and ideologies in which child sexual abuse is located. Focussing all negative attention on the woman who has been abused has no benefit for her (and is likely to be detrimental), but it does make life easier for those around her who, without this means of naming child sexual abuse as the problem of one individual, would be facing a daunting prospect of addressing an issue that permeates so many aspects of the world around them.

When forgiveness is taught as involving individuals without engagement with the wider and more complex issues around each act of child sexual abuse, it functions in a

[63] Letty M. Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louiseville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), p.123

similar way, making life easier for the wider community by drawing attention away from the need for transformation in that community, and focussing all that attention onto an act that an already burdened woman must perform. This point is made by Marie Marshall Fortune and Joretta Marshall, who raise questions about the perceived goal or purpose of forgiveness. They ask whether forgiveness is for the benefit of the offender, or part of the healing process of the person who has been hurt, and conclude that quick forgiveness is in fact for the benefit of neither offender nor victim, though it does have the benefit of eliminating the need for religious communities to deal with the costly demands put to them in the aftermath of abuse. They write, "Quick forgiveness short-circuits the process; it serves no one's interests except the wider community in supposedly relieving us of our collective responsibility to make justice."[64]

Part of the process of "making justice" out of situations of child sexual abuse will necessarily involve taking full account of the details of the experience of those who have been abused, and their emotional reactions to their having been abused. Taking account of these things is demanding and uncomfortable, whereas if the victims forgive quickly then a community's discomfort is easily avoided, allowing everyone to move beyond the issues. Margaret Kennedy sees the church's desire for victims to forgive as at times being driven by this kind of desire, since forgiveness means that the whole unpleasant business will be over, since, "If one has forgiven then there is no more need to talk about things, or to *have to hear it*."[65] The quicker forgiveness can take place, the easier it is for those who might otherwise have to listen to the stories of those who have been abused, and acknowledge the emotions they feel. Forgiveness means it is all "over and finished with."[66]

Writing in *The Courage to Tell*, Kennedy again addresses the issue of forgiveness in relation to Christian communities' desires to avoid having to talk or hear about the details of sexual abuse. She argues that to ask a person to forgive without knowing the

---

[64] Marie Marshall Fortune and Joretta L. Marshall, Introduction to Fortune and Marshall (eds.), *Forgiveness and Abuse*, p.4

[65] Kennedy, "Christianity and Child Sexual Abuse – the Survivors' Voice Leading to Change", p.133, italics in original. Carolyn Holderread Heggen makes the same point, identifying as an atmosphere she has observed in churches with regard to the facts about sexual abuse, a discomfort that is easily avoided if the victims would only forgive, allowing the whole church to move beyond the issues, "Because Christians have been uneasy confronting sexual abuse, the tendency to push for forgetfulness is understandable. If victims would quickly forgive and forget, then we wouldn't have to keep talking about something that makes us so uncomfortable" (Heggen, *Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes and Churches*, p.133)

[66] Kennedy, "Christianity and Child Sexual Abuse – the Survivors' Voice Leading to Change", p.133

details of how they have been wronged is an avoidance of truth and a denial of the violation that has taken place. In a passage that reveals her anger at those who demand forgiveness without appreciation of the facts of sexual abuse, Kennedy asks,

> …How do you forgive if you were forcibly raped by your father on your First Communion day? How do you forgive, if, as a result of sexual abuse and a sexually transmitted disease you are unable to later have your own children? How do you forgive if as a twelve year old you are made pregnant by your cousin? How do you forgive if, as an altar server, the priest made you masturbate him before he said every Mass? How do you forgive if, as a result of disability you could not run away and you were therefore subjected to serious sexual assaults? How do you forgive if, at thirteen years old your father let three of his friends sexually assault you, at the same time? How do you forgive if you were videotaped in pornography and not your picture, you, are in every pornographer's library throughout Europe?…Just how do you forgive *any form of sexual violation?*[67]

Asking for forgiveness from those who have been abused in these ways while knowing only that they were "sexually abused", without any knowledge of the details or any inclination to hear the details is, as Kennedy says, an insult. She writes, "Those who have never been sexually assaulted cannot know what they truly ask, for they have never had to forgive under these circumstances."[68] A theoretical doctrine of forgiveness constructed in a way that is divorced from the circumstances in which forgiveness is relevant, and yet is then imposed onto those circumstances, seems alien to those expected to act in accordance with it, while offering protection for others. Given the very horrible nature of the details of the circumstances of child sexual abuse, it is tempting for Christian communities to take refuge in a doctrine of forgiveness as a place where they will be spared having to hear about such things, "What many Christians want is silence about what has happened, and forgiveness is seen as the key to this silence."[69]

Connected to this desire to avoid the emotional demands of taking on board the facts and details of childhood sexual abuse, quick forgiveness also helps Christian communities to avoid having to incorporate the anger and hurt carried by women who have been sexually abused. Both Pamela Cooper-White and Peter Horsfield identify an attachment that they observe in churches to "niceness" over and above a commitment to allowing the feelings of abuse victims to be voiced or be given a place in the church.

---

[67] Margaret Kennedy, *The Courage to Tell: Christian Survivors of Sexual Abuse Tell Their Stories of Pain and Hope* (London: CTBI, 1999), p.69, italics in original.
[68] Kennedy, *The Courage to Tell*, p.69
[69] Kennedy, *The Courage to Tell*, p.70

Cooper-White writes, "Forgiveness becomes a mask of niceness that keeps unacceptable feelings of hatred, loathing, and fantasies of revenge locked out of consciousness."[70] Horsfield, too, identifies "niceness" as a desired feature particularly of more middle-class churches. Within this ideology of constructing an attractive community of friendly people in a place that offers a shelter from the unpleasantness of the outside world, forgiveness may be used as a way of avoiding precisely that ugliness from which members of the attractive community have sought refuge, "Quick forgiveness of 'unpleasantries' helps keep Christian communities nice-quickly."[71] It functions to keep up appearances.

Horsfield argues that a pressure on victims of abuse to forgive may be driven by this motivation to avoid ugliness. Talking about abuse (and he points out that once people who have been abused start talking about abuse, they may spend a considerable amount of time talking about abuse) makes church members feel uncomfortable. No one likes having to hear things that are unpleasant, when they could utilise their theology to make such talk cease. Quick forgiveness of "unpleasantries" protects the Christian community both emotionally and theologically. As Horsfield says, "they [church members] find it difficult to handle the demanding emotional responses and the hard practical and faith questions those who have been assaulted begin to ask."[72]

The consequences of this rush to restore niceness (a niceness that was most likely a screen in the first place) are considerable for those who might otherwise have been able to communicate their experiences into a place where those experiences could have belonged, deriving and contributing meaning in a common conversation. Perhaps the most obvious consequence is that these people are not permitted to express either their stories, or the emotions and questions that accompany those stories. A tendency to push people to forgiveness means that, "Feelings of rage, embarrassment, disappointment, misunderstanding, betrayal, revenge or shame are rarely publicly expressed or dealt with."[73] In particular, these feelings are not expressed or dealt with *in community*; they continue to be that which the psychiatric discourse would have them be – individual 'problems' located inside particular people, stripped of social location or meaning.

[70] Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar*, p.255
[71] Horsfield, "Forgiving Abuse – An Ethical Critique", p.58
[72] Horsfield, "Forgiving Abuse – An Ethical Critique", p.58
[73] Horsfield, "Forgiving Abuse – An Ethical Critique", p.68

A further consequence for women who have been sexually abused could be that they are not only prohibited from expressing 'negative' emotion, but even inhibited in their quite appropriate feelings of anger, hurt and indignation. These emotions are presented as things from which we are to move beyond, and quickly. They are not seen as states in which to remain for any significant period of time. The problem may come when, pressed to abandon anger, hurt and indignation, a woman who has been abused begins to think that such feelings are inappropriate to the circumstances, leading to confusion over exactly how she should expect to be treated. Horsfield takes a passage from Joyce Carol Oates' novel *We Were the Mulvaneys* to illustrate this point,

> Patrick said of Marianne that she didn't know, or didn't want to know, when she was being exploited. She didn't know what evil was. She cheated herself of knowing because she forgave too soon.[74]

Pushing women to forgive abuse may foster an existing vulnerability that accompanies sexual abuse – the victim's assumption that she is not worth any more than the way she has been treated – setting the scene for her to choose not to resist further abuse in the future.

Forgiveness and subordination

The other point to be made is that there is a real danger that when churches preach of the merits of forgiveness, this could become a tool of control over victims of violence and abuse. People who are already prone to feelings of guilt, burdened with theology that tells them it would be a further sin to fail or refuse to forgive their abuser, could be easily manipulated into a forced forgiveness without repentance, restitution, or justice. In the context of the sexual abuse of women, this can be seen as a consequence and/or a reflection of a dynamic in which women's behaviour is, to a lesser or greater extent, determined and attributed particular meaning by a more powerful discourse. This point is made by Horsfield, who writes,

> [I]n many cases where survivors of sexual abuse are pressured to forgive, it has as much to do with reinforcing patriarchal subordination of women as moral agents, and expecting women to take their place, than it has to do with encouraging appropriate Christian action.[75]

---

[74] J. C. Oates, *We Were the Mulvaneys* (London: Fourth Estate, 1996), p.226, cited in Horsfield, "Forgiving Abuse – An Ethical Critique", p.61

[75] Horsfield, "Forgiving Abuse – An Ethical Critique", p.60

Ellen Bass and Laura Davis make the observation that women who were victims of child sexual abuse can expect people around them to push them to forgive their abusers, doing so as a way to control their emotions and/or their behaviour. They warn their readers, "the issue of forgiveness is one that will be pressed on you again and again by people who are uncomfortable with your rage or want to have you back under their control."[76]

Margaret Kennedy, too, identifies forgiveness as "a powerful tool of social control"[77] – one that damages the confidence and dignity of people who have been sexually abused, directing blame onto them for their responses to the abuse, rather than directing blame onto the abuser and the wider social situation in which abuse has been perpetrated. She argues that this focus on what the victim should and should not do in response to having been sexually abused ends up reinforcing the power dynamic that was put in place by her abuser. Trying, by means of blame, to elicit forgiveness from victims of abuse means that her behaviour is being manipulated by those more powerful than herself. This preserves and exacerbates her status as being weak and under the control of people more powerful than herself.

Kennedy points out that when a powerful institution such as the church insists that weak and vulnerable people forgive those who hurt them, this works very much in favour of those with power – whether they be the abusers, or those higher up the social or religious hierarchy. She writes,

> To ask the vulnerable or weaker person to forgive protects the powerful. If the person with more power, whether familial or ecclesiastical or economic, does something harmful to another, it is very convenient to have the dominant religion teach that the person harmed must forgive the wrong.[78]

Maintaining the subordination of people who are already weak – keeping their behaviour under the control of the church – preserves a status quo that protects the comfort of those who hold the power and authority in institutions.

[76] Bass and Davis, *The Courage to Heal*, pp.150-151
[77] Kennedy, "Christianity and Child Sexual Abuse – the Survivors' Voice Leading to Change", p.132
[78] Kennedy, "Christianity and Child Sexual Abuse – the Survivors' Voice Leading to Change", pp.132-133

Silencing a Prophetic Voice

> Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves,
> for the rights of all who are destitute.
> Speak up and judge fairly;
> defend the rights of the poor and needy. (Proverbs 31: 8-9)

Having focussed on ways in which teachings on forgiveness may have a silencing and alienating influence on the voices of women who have been abused, I will now turn to look at the theological significance of this silencing of voices – voices that, by nature of the persons speaking and by nature of the content of their words, can be argued to be prophetic voices speaking out of locations of oppression and injustice. This can be understood more widely as not just the voices of the abused women themselves, but also the voices of those around them who may speak as advocates with and for them.

Forcing injustice inside the victim

One significant criticism that can be made of teachings and practices of forgiveness is that they can be highly individualistic. Forgiveness understood in terms of the psychological processes within one person, or even the relational dynamics between two, takes the act of abuse and its impact completely out of any social, political or theological context, making it a private issue for the victim (and possibly also the offender) alone. Catherine Coyle, for example, defines forgiveness in these individualistic terms, "the act of forgiveness is the inner response of one individual to another."[79]

Forgiveness understood in this way is diminished to the point of being meaningless, theologically speaking, and robs a Christian community of the opportunity to play a significant role in the processes that could be followed in a community that chooses to respond to child sexual abuse in ways that are faithful to the identity of the Christian community. Letty Russell asks the question, "What does it mean to believe in the forgiveness of sin when social structures and not just the sins of individuals are

[79] Catherine C. Coyle, "Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and Healing" in Fortune and Marshall (eds.), *Forgiveness and Abuse*, p.96

involved?"[80] It seems to mean ignoring those social structures, simplifying or even just erasing the wider issues involved in creating the conditions for the harm that was caused by the abuser.

This lack of attention to the wider context is a criticism that has been made of Sylvia Fraser's understanding of the function of forgiveness. Christine Clegg's paper "Feminist Recoveries in *My Father's House*"[81], looks at the ways that Sylvia Fraser's autobiography depicts how she understands herself as moving forward after years of child sexual abuse. Clegg outlines criticisms made of Fraser's book by other incest survivors, because of the gesture of forgiveness that Fraser makes in the book. This gesture has been seen as reflecting what she refers to as the "cultural betrayal of the abused child"[82], the betrayal being that the political issues raised by the widespread practice of incest are reduced into a problem that Fraser claims she has personally found possible to move on from through an inward act of forgiveness. Clegg summarises that in the eyes of Fraser's critics, "the father is given clemency in a gesture of forgiveness which is then taken to represent a failure of allegiance to the greater political cause."[83]

The greater political and theological cause is just far bigger than a private dispute between two individuals (or those two individuals and God). This situation just is not comparable to a personal dispute with a "brother or sister" (Luke 17:3-4). Childhood sexual abuse is both an outworking and a cause of deep wounds running through the structures and mindsets of the social setting in which it occurs. Pamela Cooper-White argues that violence against women is always "a violation of trust and rupturing of right relation with the entire community", and not simply the abuse of one individual person.[84] As such, to deal with the aftermath of abuse in any way that makes abuse the problem of the individual victim simply "misses the point", as she puts it. She addresses this specifically in relation to forgiveness, recognizing that this is one of those areas in which the church may fall into the practice of insisting that the aftermath of violence is a private matter. She writes, "Even if such forgiveness were accomplished, if it takes place in private, or relatively so, the wound to the community is not healed."[85]

---

[80] Russell, *Church in the Round*, p.32
[81] Clegg, "Feminist Recoveries in 'My Father's House'", pp.67-82
[82] Clegg, "Feminist Recoveries in 'My Father's House'", p.76
[83] Clegg, "Feminist Recoveries in 'My Father's House'", p.76
[84] Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar*, p.21
[85] Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar*, p.21

Individualistic understandings of forgiveness fit together with the privatising of the experience of abuse that was discussed in the previous chapter, as well as reflecting the tendency in the field of psychiatry (discussed and criticised in chapter two) to look at the aftermath of abuse solely as features that are internal to the individual who has been abused. Indeed, Peter Horsfield's paper on forgiveness, in criticising the individualistic nature of ways in which forgiveness is often understood, connects this tendency with the influence of the discourse of psychology.[86] Horsfield argues that the co-opting by psychologists of the practice of forgiveness has had a counter influence on how forgiveness is understood in religious communities. He describes psychological therapy as an "individual-oriented profession" [87], and claims that as such it tends to pay little or no attention to the significance of an experience in the context of community, focussing only on its impact on an individual. The limitations of the view taken by psychologists therefore, Horsfield argues, directs all responsibility away from the community and into one individual,

> [I]n a framework constrained by the four walls of the psychological consulting room, they ignore any ethical or communal dimension of responsibility in assault and place responsibility for resolving the effects of the assault solely on the individual who has been subject to the abuse.[88]

He continues, making the point that when forgiveness becomes a therapeutic tool to be utilised by an individual, it functions as a way for that one individual to deal with the impact of an action "when there are no supporting social structures of accountability, redress and restoration and affirmation of the person and their experience within a understanding community."[89] Nothing is required or expected from a community when forgiveness is seen only in terms of its internal value and internal practice by one person, and so the community can sit back and do nothing, both in terms of facing up to the fact that this sin was perpetrated in the midst of the community, and in terms of playing any part in the victim's journey from this point.

Within a Christian community, one of the things that individualistic forgiveness robs from the community is its prophetic voice that speaks from the midst of oppression and injustice. Horsfield points out that one of the consequences of forgiveness being

[86] Horsfield, "Forgiving Abuse – An Ethical Critique", pp.55-56
[87] Horsfield, "Forgiving Abuse – An Ethical Critique", p.62
[88] Horsfield, "Forgiving Abuse – An Ethical Critique", p.56
[89] Horsfield, "Forgiving Abuse – An Ethical Critique", p.58

forced inside the individual is that even when forgiveness takes place, it takes place without the wrong of the action having been acknowledged or addressed appropriately. For a Christian community, acknowledging the wrong of the action involves its acknowledging the negative impact of that action on the primary victim, but far more than this involves its acknowledging the meaning of that action within a community that supposedly takes a stand against injustice, and will "speak out", and "judge righteously."

Putting forgiveness back in context

It has been identified as a crucial stage in the process of recovering from trauma and abuse, "to have the truth of what has happened recognised by one's community of reference, and incorporated as reality into the meaning and ethos of the community."[90] The significance of experiences of abuse having a place of belonging within a community was a point made initially in chapter one, and developed further in chapters four and five, where I argued that one of the reasons for speaking in theological terms and images about the impact of child sexual abuse was that doing so drew connections with the community of faith. The experience of abuse, articulated in terms that belong to this community, would then occupy a place of belonging within it.

However, it is not enough simply to express the experience and its significance in theological terms, since in the area of forgiveness this can be done in a way that still entails a lack of belonging for women who have been sexually abused. While this vocabulary may be theological, unless it is properly situated in the context of a community that speaks and lives in a way that embodies its wider commitments, it may well have the result of further excluding these women. Peter Horsfield states, "The practice of forgiveness is more than just the psychological action of an individual: it is an individual action that takes its meaning from the ethos of the communities within which the person belongs."[91] What kind of place of belonging might be occupied within a Christian community by a person struggling with the pressures of forgiveness in the aftermath of abuse? How might these struggles belong meaningfully in a Christian community once they are retrieved from their silent places inside individual hurt people

[90] Horsfield, "Forgiving Abuse – An Ethical Critique", referring to Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (London: Pandora, 2001), p.135
[91] Horsfield, "Forgiving Abuse – An Ethical Critique", p.60

and placed back in the midst of the community whose spoken ethos of justice lends significance to the hurts inflicted on members of that community, and on the processes the whole community moves through in the aftermath of those hurts?

It cannot be argued that Jesus' ministry and mission centred on the forgiveness of sins without the struggle for justice; to expect from Christians the first without an active commitment to the second is to ask them to live according to an abridged gospel – one that makes life easier for certain groups of people. Nicholas Wolterstorff, in his paper "The Contours of Justice"[92] points to the numerous Old Testament statements of God's love of justice (examples he gives are Isaiah 61:8, Psalm 37:28). He describes this as an active love – that God both loves and performs and effects justice – and argues that followers of this justice-loving God are called to do the same, "God commands us to be lovers and practitioners of justice as He is – and pronounces judgment on those of us who are not."[93] God's love of justice, Wolterstorff points out, pays particularly attention to those who are the most vulnerable – to the widow, the orphan, the fatherless, the stranger, and the poor.[94] God's response to the oppressed involves rage at and resistance to their oppression, as well as rescue and support for those hurt (Ps. 18:7-19).

With regard to God's love and practice of justice as indicated in New Testament texts, Letty Russell argues that Jesus' choice to be present with who hunger and thirst, are excluded and needy (Matt. 25:31-46), is a choice to be present in the conditions of injustice, in solidarity with those suffering these conditions and who strive for the justice that will bring about an end to this suffering.[95] It is these people, Russell argues, who become,

> mediators of salvation, not because of their righteousness but because they help us to understand what salvation and liberation mean from the point of view of those who hunger and thirst for justice…They are a place of salvation *because Christ promises to be present there*.[96]

If the love and practice of justice is of such significance in the relationship between God and humanity, when justice is compromised in the abuse of a particular person, there is much for the Christian community to do besides insisting that this one

[92] Nicholas Wolterstorff, "The Contours of Justice: An Ancient Call for *Shalom*" in Barnes Lampman and Shattuck (eds.), *God and the Victim*, pp.107-130
[93] Wolterstorff, "The Contours of Justice, p.108
[94] Wolterstorff, "The Contours of Justice, p.111
[95] Russell, *Church in the Round*, p.121
[96] Russell, *Church in the Round*, p.121, italics in original.

particular person take on the task of inwardly forgiving the injustice perpetrated against her. James Evinger and Dorthea Yoder write, "Some of us rush to sacrifice justice on an altar of forgiveness."[97] If the practice of forgiveness is preached to a collection of individuals in the Christian community, without that community as a whole also speaking out and practicing justice, then justice has been sacrificed and the prophetic voice of the Christian community that is called to "speak out" for the destitute, "for those who cannot speak" has been silenced in the name of privatized forgiveness. The practice of injustice violates any community whose ethos is the love and practice of justice; to ignore this community violation and responsibility does a disservice to the primary victim of injustice, to the whole community, and to God.

Pressing religious communities to move away from individualistic views of forgiveness, Horsfield writes,

> Discerning whether one should forgive or not…involves consideration not only of whether it would feel good, solve some of my psychological problems, or make things easier. Determining whether to forgive or not involves discernment about the meaning of the offence within the ethos of the community.[98]

Those who have been abused and who belong to Christian communities should be able to discern in their communities that the meaning of their hurt goes beyond themselves. They should be able to hear a collective prophetic voice that speaks against the injustice they have suffered (creating a space for them to do the same), and advocates the practice of justice alongside the care of those most hurt by injustice. If they cannot hear this voice, but instead hear a voice that tells them to take their hurt away and quieten it with a private process called forgiveness, we have to ask whether this voice spoken by Christian communities authentically speaks their prophetic mission.

Building on the concerns raised in this and the previous section, in the following, and final, part of this chapter, I will look specifically at issues of power dynamics with reference to forgiveness, arguing that the vulnerability of women who have been sexually abused means that it is never pastorally appropriate or theologically sound to expect them to extend forgiveness to those in positions of power over them.

---

[97] James S. Evinger and Dorthea L. Yoder, "Sexual Abuse, Forgiveness and Justice: A Journey in Faith" in Fortune and Marshall (eds.), *Forgiveness and Abuse*, p.77
[98] Horsfield, "Forgiving Abuse – An Ethical Critique", p.60

Forgiveness, Power, and Justice

The section headed "Biblical Background" in the Church of Scotland's Forgiveness and Proportionality report states that Jesus taught "contradictions" in relation to forgiveness.[99] The scriptures cited by the report as the reasons for making this claim are firstly Jesus' teaching "How many times must we forgive? Seventy times seven!", but then also his words, "And if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck." These teachings, the report states, contradict one another. I will argue that in fact this perception of contradiction does not arise from something inherent in the teachings, but from assumptions made about these teachings (assumptions that they are for every person in relation to every other person in every circumstance), and from a lack of sophistication in the application of these teachings to situations of child sexual abuse without considering the details of the power differentials between a person who forgives and a person who is forgiven by that person. I will then look at ways in which these power differentials may be impacted by a commitment to justice for the oppressed, before finishing by arguing that the abused woman who does not forgive may well be proclaiming a resistance to injustice in the context of a community that does not voice that resistance on her behalf.

Hierarchy in forgiveness

In looking at the significance of power differentials in teachings on forgiveness, Frederick Keene's paper "The Politics of Forgiveness" pushes for a more intricate understanding of New Testament (particularly Jesus') teachings on forgiveness, and then relates this specifically to the context of forgiveness in the aftermath of child sexual abuse.

Keene makes the point that every reference in the New Testament to forgiveness is necessarily hierarchical. The majority of references to forgiveness are concerned with God's forgiveness of sin, or to Jesus' forgiveness of sins of others around him. In these passages, the one extending forgiveness is always more powerful than the one receiving

[99] Joint Report of the Mission and Discipleship Council and the Safeguarding Committee Forgiveness and Proportionality Working Group, 2008, 14.2.1

that forgiveness, "All of these references are of necessity hierarchical: within the context of the New Testament, God and Jesus are always in a (or the) position of power with regard to sin."[100]

With regard to the forgiveness of one person by another, Keene points out that there are relatively few references to this at all – seven in the gospels and four in the epistles. The forgiveness of one person by another is frequently connected to the forgiveness of humanity by God, and Keene argues that the feature of hierarchy is always built in to relationships of forgiveness between one person and another. So when asking God to "forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors", there is an assumption that the one who forgives holds power over the one who is forgiven. The word *aphiēmi*, translated as forgiveness, carries the meaning of remitting a debt or releasing a person from penalty. Both meanings entail that the person being forgiven is less powerful than the one who forgives, "To be indebted in a commercial transaction is to be in the inferior position; the creditor is in the position of power."[101] Keene argues that this is the case too in the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant in Matthew18:23-35,

> A lord (*kyrios*) forgives a slave with a large debt, but this slave refused to forgive one of his debtors. This causes the lord to revoke the original forgiveness and turn the unforgiving slave over to the torturers...The story itself could hardly be more hierarchical...Yet again, forgiveness comes down from the most powerful to the least powerful.[102]

Another example of forgiveness of one person by another, and its connection to God's forgiveness, that Keene cites to make his point about assumed hierarchy in acts of forgiveness, is Jesus' words in Luke 6:37, "Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven." Here, the word translated as forgive is *aplouō*, which usually means to divorce or dismiss, and is the term used in Jesus' teachings on divorce in Matthew 5:31 and 19:7, and Mark 10:4. Again, Keene argues that this word implies a certain power differential between the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven, since divorce was always hierarchical at this time, as something that could be issued only by a husband,

> The man, who had all the power, could divorce his wife, but she did not have the power to give him a 'bill of divorcement.'...[T]he meaning of *aplouō* contains no

[100] Keene, "Structures of Forgiveness in the New Testament", pp.124-125
[101] Keene, "Structures of Forgiveness in the New Testament", p.125
[102] Keene, "Structures of Forgiveness in the New Testament", p.128

> hint of mutuality; it was strictly a hierarchical concept where the one with the power is the one who performs the action of the verb.[103]

The only instances in which forgiveness does not flow "down" the hierarchy are those references to forgiving those to whom a person is in equal relationship (Matthew 18:21-22; Luke 17:3-4). Forgiveness is expected when the person who has been wronged is equal in power to the person who has wronged her or him, but at no point does Jesus advocate, or even mention, the forgiveness of a more powerful person by a less powerful one. Put simply, "Nothing is said about those who have power over us and against whom we might have a grievance."[104] Keene asserts, therefore, "forgiveness is neither expected nor required when the offender is higher in the power hierarchy – indeed, it probably is neither possible nor desirable."[105]

As the passage that seals the argument he is making, Keene then turns to look at Jesus' words of forgiveness on the cross in Luke 23:34, "Father, forgive (*aphiēmi*) them, for they do not know what they are doing." Keene presents this as the only time in the gospels when forgiveness is mentioned by a powerless person in relation to people who are relatively more powerful, and in this case Jesus does not forgive them but asks his father to do so. Keene argue that Jesus' 'unforgiveness' in these circumstances is of enormous significance to victims of abuse and those who expect them to forgive people in positions of power over them. If Jesus had wanted or expected those oppressed and abused by people more powerful than themselves to extend their forgiveness to their abusers, he could have done so himself and been a model for forgiveness in circumstances of abuse, but instead he chooses to pass this task away from himself. Keene writes of Jesus' words of forgiveness on the cross,

> This is the one place where, if Jesus wanted the weak to forgive the strong, he could have indicated it. He did not. He asked the strongest to forgive, and, being the less powerful, did not offer the forgiveness himself. The relative positioning within the power structures remain the same: only the more powerful can be expected to forgive. The less powerful are not expected to forgive, and, in the case of Jesus on the cross, do not forgive the more powerful."[106]

Taking the point slightly further, Keene suggests that Jesus' unforgiveness on the cross implies that forgiveness travelling 'up' the power structure is not only something

[103] Keene, "Structures of Forgiveness in the New Testament", p.126
[104] Keene, "Structures of Forgiveness in the New Testament", p.125
[105] Keene, "Structures of Forgiveness in the New Testament", p.127
[106] Keene, "Structures of Forgiveness in the New Testament", p.128

that is not expected from abused people, but that it is in fact impossible. Keene makes the point that if Jesus would have extended forgiveness in any and every circumstance in which it was possible for him to do so, the fact that he does not do so here implies that he could not, "Surely the idea of a forgiving Christ would tell us that if he could he would forgive. But he did not, and thus no one should be asked or expected to forgive those who retain the power in a relationship where forgiveness might be applicable."[107]

Keene then relates his arguments the context of those who have been sexually abused as children, arguing that the hierarchy implied in biblical teachings on forgiveness mean that forgiveness of an abuser by a the person who was abused is inappropriate to insist upon, and may well be impossible, as long as social or ecclesial structures preserve the abuser in power and the abused as relatively powerless.

Looking firstly at the case of sexual abuse by clergy, Keene argues that the beginning of the creation for the conditions of forgiveness would be to pull the abuser down from his privileged position by taking away his ordination. As long as his clerical collar awards him power and status while his victim has relatively little of either, it is unreasonable and theologically dubious for the church to expect forgiveness from her. If the church truly desires forgiveness, according to biblical principles, it will recognise the redressing of power differentials as necessary, "If the church counsels forgiveness, then the church has but one choice: strip the abuser of his ordination."[108] This should not be thought of as the offender's punishment (although it may well function as part of that as well), but as a requirement both for the victim possibly to forgive, and for the offender to receive that forgiveness.

The second case Keene refers to is that of father-daughter incest. He makes the point that in these cases, forgiveness may not be possible until the power relationship has been reversed by, for example, the daughter's reaching adulthood and the father's reaching old age.[109] Making a distinction between forgiveness as a psychological tool and forgiveness as an authentic Christian act, he writes that waiting on the reversing of the power differentials

[107] Keene, "Structures of Forgiveness in the New Testament", p.130
[108] Keene, "Structures of Forgiveness in the New Testament", p.131
[109] Keene, "Structures of Forgiveness in the New Testament", p.132

> may or may not be a psychological requirement, but the New Testament model of forgiveness explored here would indicate that it definitely is a theological and biblical requirement. Only when the patterns of power are reversed can the act of forgiveness be considered.[110]

In practice, however, there is reason to suppose that it is those who remain in a position of relative powerlessness from whom forgiveness tends to be expected. Seen as an approach to resolving a situation in which one person has been wronged, it may well be the only option for those who are powerless, whereas those with more power have other possible courses of action to take before (or instead of) forgiving the person who wronged them. Peter Horsfield points out that those with power are able to obtain justice and restitution for acts of wrongdoing against them, whereas, "Those people within the community with less structural power and practical resources are required, even pressured, to resolve offences by forgiving them."[111] He identifies in religious communities a failure to recognise and adequately address the inequalities between a victim and a perpetrator of abuse, and more widely the inequalities of gender. This imbalance of power, remaining unacknowledged and unaddressed, "results in expectations and the costs of forgiveness falling disproportionately on women."[112]

According to Horsfield then, the way that forgiveness is expected in practice is quite the reverse of how forgiveness should operate, and from whom it should be expected, following Keene's arguments above. While teachings and writings on forgiveness are frequently presented using the language of "we" and "us", it is necessary to pause to consider just who "we" are? Reading Keene's thoughts on Jesus' teachings on forgiveness, it seems an over-simplification to understand "we" as all peoples in all contexts. If this had been what Jesus had intended, then, as Keene argues, surely he would not have chosen to avoid extending forgiveness to those in relation to whom he was powerless.

However, it is less than ideal – and far from empowering – simply to wait for decades for the conditions of forgiveness to present themselves, or to wait passively for powerful institutions or individuals to create these conditions. Keene does not advocate such a thing, suggesting that the pursuit of justice could be one way in which these

[110] Keene, "Structures of Forgiveness in the New Testament", p.132
[111] Horsfield, "Forgiving Abuse – An Ethical Critique", p.65
[112] Horsfield, "Forgiving Abuse – An Ethical Critique", p.64

patterns of power could be reversed.[113] I will now turn to look at ways in which the power differentials that so often remain in place between an abuser and a woman he abused can be resisted by a community voice that denounces abuse, oppression and injustice, and strives towards the kind of power brought about by justice.

Power through justice

The CTBI report *Time for Action* makes the suggestion that it could be the continuing denial and injustice in relation to abuse that is what stands in the way of forgiveness, "Many survivors of sexual abuse find they cannot forgive, not because they do not want to, but because the injustice and trauma they have experienced has never been acknowledged or put right."[114] Read in the light of the arguments presented in Keene's paper, this could be interpreted as an expression of the impossibility of forgiveness from a person in a status of powerlessness. Her state of powerlessness, created by the abuse and the circumstances surrounding it, continues as long as she is surrounded by a community that fails to speak out against the specific injustice of abuse, and fails to show a commitment to striving for power through justice. This power through justice is relevant in the narrower and perhaps more obvious sense of justice with regards the abuser, as well as being relevant in the wider sense of justice as accountability in Christian communities that themselves operate according to structures that are unjust.

With regards justice in relation to the abuser, the sad truth is that only in a very small minority of cases of child sexual abuse will the abuser be brought to justice through the courts. According to the most up to date statistics available, less than a quarter of prosecutions for rape or attempted rape of a child under the age of sixteen result in convictions.[115] (This statistic should be read alongside the fact that it is a minority of offenders who are prosecuted, which means that the proportion of offenders who are convicted of their crimes is very small.) With this in mind, how could Christian

[113] Keene, "Structures of Forgiveness in the New Testament", p.130
[114] Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, *Time for Action*, p.126
[115] Research published by the NSPCC Child Protection Awareness and Diversity Department in December 2007 states, "Latest available figures show that in 2002 in England and Wales 1,288 individuals were prosecuted for the rape or attempted rape of a child under 16. 292 (23% of those prosecuted) received a conviction."
(http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/research/statistics/sex_offenders_statistics_wda48745.html)

communities be places in which women who have been sexually abused could experience something of the justice that would provide the opportunity for them to move out of a place of powerlessness?

One part of this could be simply the recognition in Christian communities that child sexual abuse is deeply wrong, and that those who have perpetrated these crimes against children should be (and ultimately will be, in spite of the failings of criminal justice systems) held accountable. Marie Fortune identifies this as a part of the experience of justice for a victim of sexual assault or abuse (an experience which she argues is necessary before forgiveness becomes a possibility). She writes, "At some point in the aftermath of a rape or the disclosure of sexual abuse, a victim needs some concrete expression of the fact that she/he has been wronged, that what occurred should never have happened, and that the offender is responsible."[116] While this could come from the perpetrator's repentance, or from justice achieved through the legal system, it could also come just from some person standing up and speaking out for or with the person who has been abused.

Alongside simply a recognition of the wrong that has been done should also be a condemnation of that wrong, given its significance and implications for the individual and for the community in which she is located, as well as a practical commitment to combating abuse. In this respect, the practice of protest in and by Christian communities, together with the action that should follow from it, is highly appropriate. As well as being of support and value to those who have been abused, more fundamentally protest is an authentic expression of what it means to be this kind of community. Catherine Clark Kroeger and Nancy Nason Clark write,

> Voices of protest must be raised…The Bible consistently pronounces God's judgement on those who use their power to inflict suffering on others. Conversely, great blessing is promised to those who use their power to alleviate the oppression and suffering of others. How will we respond to the challenge?[117]

As regards the justice and injustice inherent in Christian communities, a significant part of this is the incorporation of a wider variety of voices, stories, and truths into the speech of the community. Addressing the problematic implications of forgiveness being thought of as an individual process and achievement, Margaret Arms

[116] Fortune, *Sexual Violence: The Unmentionable Sin*, p.210
[117] Kroeger and Nancy Nason-Clark, *No Place for Abuse*, pp.143

argues that thinking of forgiveness only on a privatised level "only reinforces the social and religious sanctions supporting individual violence and harm unless the larger social and religious domains also are involved in the process of truthtelling."[118] To award a place to the experience of child sexual abuse as an experience of significance within the community, and a story worthy of telling and hearing within the community, is to take a stand against the injustice that silences those who are most vulnerable. A number of those writing on the subject of sexual abuse and forgiveness make this point again and again, that speaking out about and against abuse is fundamental. Peter Horsfield, for example, observes, "women who have been sexually abused within religious communities are rarely giving opportunity to express the emotional impact of what has been done to them before the whole community."[119]

Both Horsfield and Arms extend the importance of this truthtelling beyond its being an element of justice in relation to individual victims and perpetrators, but also draw a connection between truthtelling in community and the accountability of that community on issues relating to sexual abuse. Both point out that religious communities function in ways that knowingly or unknowingly participate in the perpetration and continuation of abuse. A part of the truthtelling that is a component of justice is truthtelling on the subject of actions and omissions of communities and the consequences of the conduct of the community for women who have been abused. Arms writes, "encouraging individual forgiveness without engaging the larger religious community in issues of its own need for repentance and accountability allows room for social, cultural, and religious institutions to ignore their own deeply rooted complicity."[120]

In the context of the points he makes about forgiveness falling disproportionately on women because of their relative powerlessness, Horsfield argues that part of the reason for women's not having access to the justice and restitution that is the privilege of

[118] Arms, "When Forgiveness Is Not the Issue in Forgiveness", pp.115-116
[119] Horsfield, "Forgiving Abuse – An Ethical Critique", p.68
[120] Arms, "When Forgiveness Is Not the Issue in Forgiveness", pp.116. This can be seen in Mary Pellauer, Barbara Chester and Jane Boyajian's book *Sexual Assault and Abuse* – a handbook intended to be used by those working in ministry with people who have been sexually abused – which contains a liturgy written as part of a service of healing for someone who has been sexually abused. Part of this liturgy reads, "N., Do you forgive us, the human and Christian community, for our silence and complicity as individuals and as a society, for allowing this abuse to have happened to you, and for our failures and inadequacies in reaching out to you and healing you when you needed us?" (p.237). This suggests that the way that these failure and inadequacies are to be dealt with is by the forgiveness of the person hurt by them, and not by any commitment to change within those individuals or societies.

the powerful when they are wronged, is that "they lack the social power to muster community opinion in their support."[121] If this is the case (and as has been seen, it is often experienced as being the case) in a Christian community, then that community has lost sight of its identity and its mission. Allowing the privileged to enjoy restitution for their injuries while pushing the vulnerable to move on quietly is not a living expression of a commitment to a God who loves justice and is enraged at the oppression of the vulnerable.

Leah Coulter, writing on the need for a pastoral theology that specifically relates to Christian women sexually abused as children, argues for the necessity of realising the centrality in the gospels of a liberating power,

> The good news is not only a gospel of repentance and forgiveness, but also a gospel of rescue, liberation, and healing. The message of the Kingdom of God is a demonstrated message of freedom. It is the active power and presence of the Kingdom of God in our midst.[122]

The gospel preached as repentance and forgiveness alone is not the gospel. This truncated and watered down gospel is not 'good news' for everyone, but only for those who preach it in (possibly deliberate) ignorance of the experiences of those for whom 'good news' would be biblical protest, empowerment, and justice. A Christian community with a commitment to the gospel – the 'good news' for *all* people – will take seriously the importance of defending and vindicating the victims of injustice, and proclaiming and practicing justice.

While in some ways, being such a place might seem like a daunting prospect, the point is frequently made that those who have been sexually abused do not expect nor require their communities to be places in which justice is proclaimed and manifested flawlessly or completely. Marie Fortune and Joretta Marshall, write, "There is seldom perfect justice but often approximate justice is sufficient."[123] One of the women cited in the CTBI publication *The Courage to Tell*, states, "I pray and believe now that in the end the abusers have to face God…This is what keeps me going."[124] This expression of hope in a justice that will eventually be realised suggests that a Christian community need not be expected to bring about the full justice that is deserved. Rather, it could be a place that recognises the struggle towards a justice that has not yet been realised, recognising

[121] Horsfield, "Forgiving Abuse – An Ethical Critique", p.65
[122] Coulter, "A Pastoral Theology for the Sinned Against", p.196
[123] Fortune and Marshall, Introduction to Fortune and Marshall (eds.), *Forgiveness and Abuse*, pp.3-4
[124] Margaret Kennedy, *The Courage to Tell*, p.39

too that in the meantime, prayer and faith in justice, as well as a spoken and active commitment to this justice, could be enough to sustain women who have been sexually abused and who wait to be vindicated.

Listening to the voice of unforgiveness

The final point to be made in this chapter concerns listening to the voice of those who do not forgive their abusers. As discussed in earlier sections, people who do not forgive may find themselves judged and even ostracised by Christian communities, charged with the 'sin' of unforgiveness. In this section, I suggest that actually unforgiveness may occupy a vital space in Christian communities, as a powerful proclamation against injustice and oppression, and a refusal to resign herself to acquiescence to a power structure according to which the powerful remain powerful and the powerless 'turn the other cheek' to abuses of power.

Peter Horsfield asks the question,

> [W]hat if the authorities on what Christian forgiveness means and how it is to be practised are not the male theologians or philosophers writing from their privileged positions of professional detachment in comfortably paid suburban practices; but those women nurtured within the Christian faith over decades, who are then thrust into a real-life situation in which they have the first hand information for determining what is the appropriate Christian response to this situation?[125]

I would not want to argue that when it comes to the meaning of Christian forgiveness, women who have been abused are necessarily *more* knowledgeable than the comfortable academics he mentions (although they could be), but what is certainly true is that they live with a particular kind of knowledge. The knowledge they have on the meaning of forgiveness, and the appropriate Christian response to abuse, is of a nature that means that those whose voices that are usually given precedence – and quite often exclusive precedence – do not and cannot have access to it.

Given the fact that women who have been abused are in possession of knowledge of this different nature regarding the meaning of forgiveness, as well as of injustice, it can be argued that whatever they decide to do in relation to forgiveness is of significance to a community that strives towards richer understandings of these things. Horsfield

[125] Horsfield, "Forgiving Abuse – An Ethical Critique", p.57

presents a further challenge to think about what it could mean if Christian communities did not assume that the practice of 'unforgiveness' is to be condemned and corrected, but was actually a practice from which the community has much to learn about what forgiveness means in different contexts,

> What if, when women survivors of abuse say they are not able to forgive, they are not being weak, aberrant, or damaged, to be quarantined through prayer or counselling until they have recovered normality; but are reflecting a profound insight into the essential nature of Christian forgiveness?[126]

Similarly, James Evinger and Dorthea Yoder, writing on forgiveness and justice in relation to sexual abuse, say that the truth that victims of abuse bring to a community of faith is "critical to the community's wellness and preservation."[127] They go on to make the claim, "Victims have the moral authority to be the conscience of the church, but few congregations see the potential."[128] In the previous chapter, I expressed reservations over Carolyn Holderread Heggen's statement that people who have been sexually abused are "a joy and inspiration to behold", and that "we need to honor their strength, salute their courage, and learn from their journey.[129] My concern with this phrasing is that people who have been sexually abused become exalted to a superior moral status, when in fact all that is desirable and necessary is that they become exalted to an equal moral status. I have similar concerns about Evinger and Yoder's claim that people who have been sexually abused "have the moral authority to be the conscience of the church", when this is a role and authority that would better be widely shared. But in spite of this concern, it is worth considering whether the kind of insights brought by women who have been sexually abused, and the statements and decisions they make and the actions they take in relation to the subjects of forgiveness and justice, could have the status and value of expressing truths that would otherwise not be known. They may also have the value of calling Christian communities to moral accountability on their actions, omissions, and expectations regarding forgiveness and injustice.

It is those to whom justice will make the biggest difference who are best placed to indicate how, where and when justice is or is not manifest. The voice of unforgiveness could be a voice that notices and announces the presence of injustice, and stands in opposition to this. Letty Russell, discussing the statement that Jesus is to be found with

[126] Horsfield, "Forgiving Abuse – An Ethical Critique", p.57
[127] Evinger and Yoder, "Sexual Abuse, Forgiveness and Justice, p.84
[128] Evinger and Yoder, "Sexual Abuse, Forgiveness and Justice, p.84
[129] Heggen, *Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes and Churches*, p48

"the outsiders", suggests that his location and identification with these people can be understood not as a favouring of any particular group as more righteous than any other, but because these outsiders "are the ones who help us know when justice is done and all are included."[130] Favouring the voices of the privileged – the voices of those who already enjoy justice and inclusion for themselves – means that a community will be far less likely to know when justice and inclusion are achieved for all, since the privileged ones who are not in desperate need of these things are not so likely to notice. An authentic Christian community will be keenly listening to those voices that are often silenced, and wondering what the proclamation of unforgiveness says about the manifestation of justice or injustice in their community.

Peter Horsfield specifies that any *ethical* act of forgiveness needs to have as its priority questions of how the act of forgiveness functions to protect and restore the dignity and integrity of victims of injustice and abuse, how the act of forgiveness functions to protect other people who are vulnerable to abuse, how the act of forgiveness involves addressing issues of fairness in relations between people in different locations in a power structure, and how the act of forgiveness involves meeting moral and legal obligations.[131] If acts of forgiveness are viewed in this context, then if a woman who has been sexually abused does not forgive her abuser, then this could be a manifestation of important values that the community is not upholding, "one should be alert to signals from survivors of assault that they cannot forgive…It is not that the woman is holding a grudge, but rather that they take seriously the values by which we are urged to live."[132] In a context in which these values that Horsfield has identified are not upheld by the community, then the act of unforgiveness is in fact the most authentically Christian act in the circumstances. Unforgiveness in these circumstances involves recognising the importance of the integrity of the victim, the protection of the vulnerable, the injustice of power inequalities and their abuse, whereas forgiveness in these circumstances would involve denying the significance of all these things. As Horsfield writes,

> If these values are not affirmed or upheld by the broader community, the individual is placed in a situation where they cannot forgive without either denying their own worth or truth, giving in to the violence, denying the value of that which has been violated, or dehumanising their assaulter.[133]

[130] Russell, *Church in the Round*, p.197
[131] Horsfield, "Forgiving Abuse – An Ethical Critique", pp.61-62
[132] Horsfield, "Forgiving Abuse – An Ethical Critique", pp.62
[133] Horsfield, "Forgiving Abuse – An Ethical Critique", pp.62

Horsfield argues that women who have been sexually abused live and act in a context in which they may well be able to see shortcomings and faults in what are thought of as sound doctrines of forgiveness – doctrines which have never been considered as themselves tools of injustice. Women who have been sexually abused may well be (some of) the ones who are able to see that "the common understandings of forgiveness reflected within churches are a patriarchal aberration of Christian theology that urgently needs correction."[134] They may be (some of) the ones who can point out that the Christian community, by expecting them to forgive while abuse and injustice and their causes remain unaddressed and unacknowledged, is in fact championing the continuation of oppression and the protection of those with power.

The question of forgiveness has to be secondary to the questions of how or if vulnerable people are safe from abuse, and how or if complicit institutions and theologies are undergoing transformation so as to function as authentic locations and expressions through which abuse is resisted, and justice is paramount. The title of Margaret Arms' essay, "When Forgiveness is not the Issue in Forgiveness"[135] (which addresses religious understandings of forgiveness after abuse) suggests that actually in the aftermath of abuse the question of whether or not to forgive is not the significant question. She argues that focussing on whether to forgive may in fact confuse and obscure the real issue for those who have been abused, which is how to defend themselves against abuse and the ways in which institutions create the conditions for that abuse, while at the same time confronting individual abusers and complicit institutions. Placing to one side the question of whether or not to forgive, Arms argues that it is far more important to ask the question of how the decisions that are made and the actions that are taken in the aftermath of abuse will function as forces against abuse, "the more compelling question surrounding forgiveness is not whether to forgive, but whether the process involved in whichever choice is made enables or resists abuse."[136]

Depending on how it is done, and on the features of the context in which it is done, either forgiving or not forgiving abusers and complicit communities and institutions can be an expression of prophetic resistance to injustice. Either forgiving or not forgiving can be a proclamation of the centrality of justice in the gospels, and the

[134] Horsfield, "Forgiving Abuse – An Ethical Critique", p.57
[135] Arms, "When Forgiveness Is Not the Issue in Forgiveness", p.107
[136] Arms, "When Forgiveness Is Not the Issue in Forgiveness", p.124

empowerment of those who are oppressed. The voice of unforgiveness, speaking in a context in which child sexual abuse is barely recognised or confronted, is one that Christian communities that want to remain authentic to a gospel that condemns the domination of the vulnerable and powerless, could do well to listen to and to echo. The place of forgiveness alongside a message of liberation from injustice and empowerment of the vulnerable means that the 'good news' for women who have been sexually abused is that whichever choice they make with regard to forgiveness can be a prophetic statement of justice, "With integrity and power, whether or not the victim forgives, he or she can say to individual offenders and complicit religious institutions, 'I am free of this, but you are not, and we are not reconciled.'"[137]

Conclusion

This chapter has explored teachings and practices of forgiveness with the question in mind of how these teachings and practices impact on the extent to which and the manner in which women who have been sexually abused may find a place in Christian communities for their past experiences of abuse to belong. When forgiveness is understood as something that must be done by those who have been victimised, in order to return individuals and communities to a place that enjoys a certain cosmetic peace (an absence of conflict and/or of emotions that cause discomfort), forgiveness functions to isolate and exclude those women who do not forgive their abusers. These women become disturbers of the peace and threats to the structures that maintain a particular system, and they are not welcome in a place that prizes an individualistically conceived relational harmony above a commitment to addressing the structures and practices in which the whole community is implicated.

In a parallel to the point made in the previous chapter – that the voices of abused women may serve the church by alerting churches to their own need for transformation – these voices may also serve the church by speaking prophetically to call the churches to notice and combat injustice and abuse and return to its commitment to justice for those who are victimised by abuse. They may do this by highlighting and calling the churches to address the injustice of a particular abusive relationship, or by calling them to address

[137] Arms, "When Forgiveness Is Not the Issue in Forgiveness", p.124

the injustice inherent in a much wider context in which particular injustices are symptoms and manifestations of a culture that churches have emulated and encouraged.

As stated at the beginning of this chapter, if forgiveness is understood in context and in all its complexities, there is very much the potential for this to be a way in which experiences of abuse can be spoken of in such a way that they are understood in connection to a concept and practice that sits at the heart of Christian communities. While not rejecting forgiveness as a constructive basis for speech and a positive thing to be done if understood well and carefully and if certain conditions are met, this chapter has argued that it should not be the central issue in situations of abuse; that there are questions of justice that are prior to questions of forgiveness. The voices of women speaking about their experiences of abuse can be of value in Christian community whether they speak of forgiveness or of unforgiveness. A voice that speaks unforgiveness need not be a voice that speaks merely personal bitterness, but actually one that speak to alert a community to the injustice taking place under its noses, and its own complicity in this, and calls that community back to a practical commitment to justice.

Chapter Seven
Belonging in a Safe Place

This thesis began with a chapter entitled "Writing in a Safe Place". Having identified the features of the location in which I would be working, and in the second chapter rejecting the location of the psychiatric discourse as one in which I would very deliberately not be working, I set about the task of looking at how past experiences of childhood sexual abuse can have the status of belonging in Christian communities. I proposed to consider this question in two parts – firstly thinking about how these experiences can be thought of has having meanings that belong in Christian communities, and secondly about how the women who have been abused can be people who belong in Christian communities

In chapter three I looked in detail at the written descriptions of the experiences of three women who were sexually abused as children, and these accounts provided the resources with which to construct a reflection on how women's experiences of abuse can be spoken of in such a way that they are understood as having meanings that are significant in a Christian context. This reflection took place in chapter four, which stands as an illustration of the possibility of articulating aspects of experiences of abuse in terms that are part of the vocabulary of Christian communities.

In chapter five I turned to look at the question of how women who have been abused can belong in Christian communities, approaching this question from the angle of the churches' past and present speech on these issues, and the extent and ways in which women who have been abused may have a place and an opportunity to speak their experiences so that these experiences belong amongst other experiences in this community. In chapter six I looked specifically at the issue of forgiveness as one that, although having the potential to be a way of speaking about abuse in terms that belong in Christian community, is often taught in such a way so as to judge and effectively exclude women who have been abused and who do not forgive. I argued that questions of justice are prior to questions of forgiveness, and I ended this chapter by looking at ways in which women's voices on their experiences of abuse can belong in Christian communities as prophetic voices that speak against injustice.

In this concluding chapter, I put the two sides of the research question together, considering the central question of how women's past experiences of childhood sexual abuse can belong in Christian communities; how they can be either welcomed or excluded both in terms of the meanings these experiences are understood as having, and in terms of the extent and ways in which these experiences may be spoken alongside those of others. In doing so, I will return to the idea introduced at the very beginning of the thesis – that of being located in a "safe place". Given the past conduct of churches in relation to childhood sexual abuse and the way in which those who have been abused have been, and continue to be, treated and regarded in churches, there are important questions to be explored about the safety and appropriateness of even trying to belong in such a place. Having discussed these questions, and reaching a point of concluding that it is not sensible to assume churches to be safe places in which women's past experiences of childhood sexual abuse can belong, I will conclude with some provisional thoughts on the possibility of these experiences nevertheless being safely a part of Christian communities that can be found on the edges of, or outside of, organised churches.

Church as a "Safe Place"?

At the beginning of the thesis, I explained the personal context of the study as one of frustration and alienation, resulting from attempts to be in churches in a way that would have involved not denying or dissociating from my own past experiences of sexual abuse, but rather those experiences being at home in this place. The materials covered in the thesis have shown that this experience is by no means unique. As chapters five and six showed, from a long-standing practice of outright denial and silencing of the facts of child sexual abuse, to speaking of abuse in a way that reduces its significance or speaks of its significance in terms imported from outside the church; from poor and simplistic teachings on healing and forgiveness, to a lack of attention to the injustice manifest in the occurrence and aftermath of child sexual abuse, the churches today approach the issue of childhood sexual abuse with a record that reveals failure, rejection and exclusion in relation to those who have been abused.

There is reason to be hopeful, as the churches *have* begun on a process of incorporating past experiences of childhood sexual abuse, and understanding the significance of doing so. The improvements that are being made to safeguarding

policies, the publications produced by CTBI (Churches Together in Britain and Ireland) on issues around sexual abuse and the churches' response, and particular denominations' follow-ups to these documents, are all evidence of the fact that progress is being made. There is good reason to be hopeful that there is a movement towards churches becoming places in which women's past experiences of childhood sexual abuse belong.

However, there is still much reason to be cautious. Given the undeniable long-term resistance to allowing any place in the church for experiences of abuse, the decision to try to make a home here for these experiences is one that raises several questions, and I will look at two of these here. The first is the question of whether the situation of long-term silence and exclusion really has improved at ground level in the churches. The second is the question of at what stage it is possible and appropriate for those who have been silenced and excluded for so long to begin to foster towards that place that has treated them in this way, the trust that would be a necessary part of their experiences now belonging in this place.

An end to silence and exclusion in churches?

In terms of the written materials that have been produced by churches on the subject of child sexual abuse, the situation now is certainly better than the situation a decade ago. The beginnings of theological engagement with the subject can be seen, as can a striving for the voices of women who have been abused to be respected and valued in the churches. However, when considering whether churches are safe places for past experiences of childhood sexual abuse to seek to belong, it is necessary to question the extent to which this written material has actually permeated attitudes and practices as they will be encountered.

The churches have come under criticism from some for a lack of response to the *Time for Action* report. Jane Cervous, for example, writes,

> It became clear that while there were some encouraging signs, there was not the passion, urgency or thorough grasp of the issues that the survivors had hoped for. Yet this is an excellent report and I could not imagine a better fuel to fire the

> energy and engagement of the churches on this issue. So why have the flames not burned?[1]

She suggests as possible answers to this question the fact that the subject matter is so painful, and also that it tends to focus more on the problems raised by the occurrence of abuse rather than on any solutions to those problems. This may well be true, but it is also important to bear in mind the fact that materials that challenge churches to think and respond differently in relation to abuse will not be absorbed and implemented immediately (Chevous is writing in 2004 about the lack of response to a report written in 2002). Any shift in thoughts and attitudes takes time, and even with the very best published materials guiding churches on how to understand and speak of issues around childhood sexual abuse, their movement towards doing this will happen gradually.

At the same time, it is clear looking at the materials produced by different denominations that some are further than others along this path of changing attitudes.[2] It is also clear that some more than others are committed to listening to the voices of those who have been abused, seeing these perspectives as valuable in the process of drafting and implementing church policy and response.[3] But whether the reason for a lack of transformation is down to churches' resistance, or just the gradual nature of change, the

---

[1] Jane Chervous, *From Silence to Sanctuary: A Guide to Understanding, Preventing and Responding to Abuse* (London: SPCK, 2004), p.1

[2] For example, the child protection policies of the Catholic Church and the Church of Scotland both imply a concern with the vulnerability of adults at the hands of predatory children that seems to misplace the blame for sexual abuse with the child rather than with the adult. The Catholic policy, *Creating a Safe Environment* states that the reason for parental consent being obtained for a child to travel in other parents'/volunteers' cars is "to ensure the welfare of children and young people *and also in recognition of the potential vulnerability of an adult being alone with a child*" (http://www.csasprocedures.uk.net/chapters/p_nat_pol_crea.html, chapter 4.1.5, category C, under the heading "Private Cars"). The Church of Scotland's *Child Protection Handbook*, having stated, "You must not have inappropriate physical or verbal contact with children or young people", immediately then says, "You must not allow yourself to be drawn into inappropriate attention-seeking behaviour" (Unit 4, Section 1), which does implicitly suggest that children may at times be the initiators of child abuse, and that adults should be on their guard.

[3] The Methodist Church appears by far the most committed in this area. Its *Safeguarding* policy highlights the importance of drawing on the experiences of church members, and particularly children, in presenting issues of child protection. Its 2006 report, *Tracing Rainbows Through the Rain* strongly prioritises the perspectives of people who have been sexually abused, and a large portion of the report is an extended reflection on language and practices in the Christian tradition, written by a woman who was sexually abused as a child. This, together with shorter presentations of the experiences of individuals, informs the reflections and recommendations of the report.

I think here also of conversations I have had with the heads of safeguarding in four major denominations. When I asked whether these denominations' safeguarding offices seek the involvement and the insights of people who have been abused in their discussion, drafting and implementation of policy, the reply from two of them was that no they do not, and the reason given in both cases was that this would be too time-consuming. (Both denominations in question seek the input of social workers, of academic theologians, of mental health professionals, of ministers and laypeople in churches, and did not give any reason why they thought that people who have been abused would be more time-consuming than anyone else.)

result is still that churches may well not be safe places in which past experiences of childhood sexual abuse can belong.

For a Christian community to be a safe place for past experiences of childhood sexual abuse to belong, it would have to embody those features that I identified in chapter one as being features of a place in which it is safe to write. It would be a place in which there were awareness and safeguards with respect to the power yielded by the voices that are more dominant in these places. This would mean that it was possible for the voices of women who had been sexually abused to speak in whatever terms they chose, and create the possibility for these voices to engage critically with the discourses that tend to be dominant. A Christian community as a safe place in which to have this conversation would be a Christian community open to hearing and being critiqued by these voices, awarding them as much respect as it would to those voices that are more commonly favoured. And a Christian community as a safe place for past experiences of abuse to belong would be one committed (in practical action as well as in its speech) to the resistance of injustice and the pursuit of justice for victims of abuse.

It is possible that a church could be this community, and it is fair to say that it is probable that it will not be. The extent to which written materials calling for changes in attitude, understanding and response have been taken on board in a particular location is a question that is imperative to ask and answer before assuming that any particular church is a safe place for past experiences of childhood sexual abuse to belong. If a church has begun on the process of taking these things on board, it is necessary to establish just where they are in this process, and the particulars of the process in which they are engaged. This leads to the question regarding the point at which it is sensible to trust a church to be a safe place for these experiences to belong.

When is it appropriate to trust the church?

Given this very gradual movement in which (some) churches are beginning to appreciate the significance of childhood sexual abuse, at what point in this gradual process does it become possible or sensible to trust churches to be safe places to which to belong? As previously stated, a woman who chooses to speak her experiences into a church that has not historically been a place in which speech about these experiences was

welcome, puts herself out on a limb, and takes a huge risk. If a church shows no indication of having begun on the process towards becoming the safe place characterised above, then it is not reasonable or sensible to invest in such a place the trust that is a necessary part of belonging.

If a church shows some awareness concerning the power exercised by the more dominant voices in its community, then there is a chance that a woman who has been abused can bring her voice and insights into shared conversation without further rejection and hurt. If a church displays some openness to having its understandings and practices critiqued and shaped by these voices, then they have a chance of being respected and heard, and not silenced. If a church demonstrates some commitment to speaking and practicing justice with women who have been abused, then these women's experiences have a chance of being transformative and transformed. Making a judgement concerning the chance of belonging and the size of the risk involved will be up to an individual, but to be even considered potentially trustworthy a church must be willing to acknowledge their own complicity and their own mistakes and incompetency with regard to these issues in the past, as admitting what has been done wrong in the past is a necessary part of building trust for the future.[4]

Again, it is possible that a church could demonstrate those characteristics that make trust possible and sensible, and it is probable that it will not. A church *could be* a Christian community in which past experiences of childhood sexual abuse can safely belong, but it cannot be assumed that a church *will be* this place. Given this reality, I will conclude by considering the possibility of past experiences of abuse belonging in Christian community, when this is understood as something other than the organised church. The purpose of doing so is to show that the churches' poor or slow responses, and their tacit or deliberate exclusion of particular voices that speak of experiences that are not welcome, does not determine that these voices and experiences cannot belong in Christian community; that the failings of the church are not the final word in the

[4] Again, it is the Methodist Church that is especially strong on this point. Its *Safeguarding* policy is critical of past failings of the church, stating, "It is vital to recognise where the burden of relapse is carried. It is not carried by the church which has proclaimed what it terms 'forgiveness' but by the young child who has become the object of abuse in circumstances where the church ought to have been realistic and brave enough to do something about the situation" (p.6). Its report *Tracing Rainbows Through the Rain* is also self-critical when it comes to looking at the way in which the church has engaged with issues of abuse, admitting, "Sometimes…it has been the Church's need for order and tradition, its songs and its liturgies which have re-opened old wounds or caused further pain for survivors of childhood sexual abuse" (Introduction).

fostering of a Christian community that can be a safe place for some of the most vulnerable.

Christian Communities as "Safe Places"

Moving away from church

Reservations about the possibility of churches being places in which it is safe or sensible to invest the trust and take the risks that would be necessary if experiences of childhood sexual abuse were to belong in these places, also raises a more fundamental question – one that has led to my moving away from looking at how these experiences could belong specifically in churches, towards how they may belong in Christian communities. In addition to the questions about the actual influence of literature on the attitudes and practices that will be encountered in churches, and the question of identifying the point at which churches can be trusted enough to make the risk of belonging worthwhile, there is the question of why try at all to find a home for experiences of childhood sexual abuse in a place that has not welcomed them? Given the long history in churches of outright denial of sexual abuse, given their failure to incorporate the issue of sexual abuse alongside other social and criminal issues built into the church year, given their lack of attention to the voices of the victims of sexual abuse in Biblical narratives, given the way in which their speech and their practices have forced sexually abused women into deeper silences, a more fundamental question arose: Is it wise or appropriate to attempt to make a home for these experiences in a place that in many ways has made it so clear for so long that it does not want them?

During the period over which the thesis was written, I shifted from speaking about "church" and "churches" to speaking about "Christian communities". The reason for this shift was because both my research and my experience increasingly suggested that it was not justified to suppose that churches would be places in which past experiences of childhood sexual abuse could belong. Increasingly, it suggested quite the opposite – that it was reasonable to expect that churches would be places in which these experiences would be excluded and silenced. The question then became more pressing – why even try to seek to see these experiences belong in a place likely to misunderstand and reject them? I found myself unable to find any answer to this question that did not

sound like a battered woman rationalising her return to the man who beats her, i.e. perhaps this time it will be different, perhaps now there has been change.[5] I began to speak instead in terms of Christian community rather than church because, while the church had begun to look less and less like a place that could be considered safe, I saw reason to retain hope of belonging among other Christians in community.

The reason for this hope, as with part of the reason for my reservations about women's experiences of childhood sexual abuse having a status of belonging in churches, is grounded in experience. Personal experience may be limited in the sense that it cannot and should not be over-estimated in the manner in which it may apply to anyone other than the person who chooses to relate a particular experience, but it may still point to a possibility of a reality.

On reaching the end of this study, one of my greatest frustrations, as I mentioned in the very first section, is that the requirements of a PhD thesis (in Aberdeen, at any rate) have been such that it has been impossible for me to engage with the experience of childhood sexual abuse in the way that I had hoped at the beginning would have been possible. It had been my expectation that writing about childhood sexual abuse from the context of a very personal investment with the topic would involve and result in an exploration that was both meaningful and appropriate given the highly emotive nature of the topic. The reality has been a disappointing one of being constantly restricted by the requirement to conform with academic customs that were in fact of little help in the task of engaging with this experience. In fact, I found that these requirements often dragged me away from the experience I had hoped to remain in conversation with, and into an abstract world, entirely detached from and irrelevant to the experience that had motivated me to begin the study.

However, the thesis did begin by my describing how personal experience had led to the particular question I have been asking, and so it seems fitting to end by telling of how personal experience has led to my having some hope of the thesis question's being answered positively. My own experience is such that, although I have never known any organised church setting to be a place in which a history of childhood sexual abuse was

[5] It is always possible that there has genuinely been change, but still something unsettling about pursuing a relationship that has in the past been so hurtful and unhealthy.

welcome in the same way as many other histories were welcome, nevertheless this past has been welcome and significant in Christian community outside the formal structures of the church. I will conclude simply by recounting one such place, which points to the hope that it is possible, even if not commonplace, for experiences of childhood sexual abuse to belong fully, richly, meaningfully and positively in Christian community.

Ángel

One of the places I mentioned as having been a place in which my own past experiences of abuse took on a very real status of belonging was in ministry with abandoned and abused babies and children in Bolivia. Living in the Andean city of Cochabamba, I had the opportunity to work with a group of missionaries from the US, helping to establish a home for these children. Most of the children had parents living, but parents who for a variety of reasons were in no state to be caring for their children. My time spent there was filled with rich, challenging and difficult experiences, but one stands out above the rest as the one that made it abundantly clear that my own past was of significance in this place, among this community of Christians who had a shared commitment to loving and advocating for children who had been rejected and hurt by their families.

Late one evening in March 2005, a little boy named Ángel arrived our doorstep. Ángel's mother had abandoned him in a shop on the outskirts of the city, and a compassionate shopkeeper had cared for him for a couple of days before alerting the authorities who brought Ángel to us. Ángel was twenty months old, obviously neglected, very thin and lethargic, with huge and empty brown eyes.

I arrived at the home the morning after Ángel's arrival to find the other children eating breakfast, but Ángel refusing all food and drink. He sat at the dining table, staring into space, having eaten nothing since his arrival the previous night. It was decided that the other children would be taken to play, and that I would stay with Ángel, with the somewhat daunting task of trying to persuade a child who did not speak and did not make eye contact that it would be good for him to eat something. I started by suggesting he eat his breakfast, but he shook his head, no. After sitting with him for a little while, I decided to try something different, and asked, "Quieres un plátano?" ("Do you want a

banana?"), attempting to make this sound like an especially exciting suggestion. He nodded.

I carried Ángel to the pantry, as he was too weak to walk. I showed him that I was taking two bananas, one for each of us. Returning to the table, I peeled them both and started to eat mine, while he stared at me intently, as if discerning whether the banana-eating route was a safe one to take. Apparently he decided it was, as he ate his own, with much encouragement, following up the banana with bread and milk. Ángel and I remained inseparable for several days, as he learned to trust, one person at a time.

I am not a special person; there is nothing extraordinary about me that meant that a tiny mistreated little boy decided he would respond to me when he had refused to respond to the others who had tried to engage with him. However, we found at this point and at a number of others, that it was often the children from especially traumatic backgrounds with whom I would have the most significant relationships and experiences. In this encounter with Ángel I first realised that while I would never be in any sense grateful for the things I had been subjected to, or see them as justified, or outweighed or compensated for, it was possible for me to move forward with those things in such a way that they could be a significant part of a ministry shared with a community of people. Since my particular perspective, along with a knowledge and understanding of the background to that perspective, was recognised and affirmed by those around me, in this sense my own past experiences of childhood sexual abuse truly belonged in this place; they were seen as shaping a perspective and a practical approach that was valued among the perspectives and approaches of the other Christians who were committed to the same goals.

I specified above that for a Christian community to be a safe place in which past experiences of childhood sexual abuse could belong, it would be a place in which it was possible for the voices of women who have been abused to speak in the terms that they chose. This was the case in Cochabamba, as my relationships with the most hurt of these children became a way in which I 'spoke' my own past, but in a way in which that past was transformed from something destructive into something that could be the basis for positive and meaningful relationship. I also stated that for a Christian community to be a safe place in which to 'speak' these experiences, there would be an openness to hearing

respectfully the voices of those who have been abused. In Cochabamba, my voice was seen as being of equal and particular value among a community of people who all spoke and acted to care and advocate for children who had been especially hurt.

The third aspect I identified of a Christian community as a safe place in which these experiences of abuse could belong was that this would be a place that embodied a very real commitment to the resistance of injustice and the pursuit of justice for those who had been abused. Again, in Cochabamba, this commitment to justice and riling against the injustice that brought abused and neglected children to our doorstep was at the core of everyday life. At that point, this happened in prayer and in frustrated outbursts between ourselves. Now it also happens in lobbying local government agencies on those attitudes and practices that have been and continue to be the most damaging to our children, as well as in raising awareness in our home countries of the injustices that have led to these situations.

When members of a Christian community situate themselves with women who have been abused, creating a place for these women to have a voice that is respected and valued as it speaks among others that also expose issues of injustice, then these women and their experiences belong in this community. Not as objects of charity, but as bearers of experiences that are rightfully and usefully part of this place. Rebecca Parker writes of how those who have been abused can act in a way that voices the brokenness they have experienced, as well as speaking this brokenness in such a way that gives rise to a way of living in which experiences of abuse belong as part of a history that is the foundation of a Christian expression of compassion and justice,

> We must find how we can hold loss in our arms and move in rhythm with it…[W]e cannot live until we learn to embrace life's realities of betrayal, violence, suffering, and grief. How to hold all this in our arms without being destroyed by sorrow I did not know…But somehow, just as Mary had cradled her crucified son in her arms and wailed, we had to hold the bodies of earth's violated people and voice our grief. Our grief might enable us, the survivors, to act in the world with determination and compassion.[6]

In these ways, there is very real reason to hope that the women's past experiences of childhood sexual abuse can belong meaningfully and constructively in Christian community, perhaps because of, but even in spite of, the church.

---

[6] Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), p.90

Bibliography

Angelou, Maya, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, in *The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* (New York: Random House, 2004), pp.1-222

Armstrong, Louise, *Kiss Daddy Goodnight* (New York: Hawthorne Books, 1978)

Armstrong, Louise, *Rocking the Cradle of Sexual Politics: What Happened When Women Said Incest* (London: Women's Press, 1996)

Ashcroft Bill, Griffiths and Tiffin, Helen, *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* (London; New York: Routledge, 1998)

Bartky, Sandra, "Sympathy and Solidarity" in Sandra Bartky, *Sympathy and Solidarity and Other Essays* (Lanham, MD; Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002)

Bass, Ellen and Davis, Laura, *The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse* (London: Random House, 2002)

Bass, Ellen and Thornton, Louise, *I Never Told Anyone* (New York; London: Harper and Row, 1983)

Blake, Heidi, "Child sex abuse allegations uncovered in Church of England files", *The Telegraph*, 25 February 2010, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/religion/7307962/Child-sex-abuse-allegations-uncovered-in-Church-of-England-files.html

Bons-Storm, Riet, *The Incredible Woman: Listening to Women's Silences in Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996)

Bracken, Patrick and Thomas, Philip, *Postpsychiatry: Mental Health in a Postmodern World* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005)

Brison, Susan, *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* (Princeton, N.J.; Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2003)

Brock, Rita Nakashima, and Parker, Rebecca Ann, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us* (Boston MA: Beacon, 2002)

Brown, Joanne Carlson and Bohn, Carole R. (eds.), *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989)

Brown, Laura S., and Ballou, Mary (eds.), *Personality and Psychopathology: Feminist Reappraisals* (New York: Guilford Press, 1992)

Browne, Ángela and Finkelhor, David, "Impact of Child Sexual Abuse: A Review of the Research", *Psychological Bulletin* 99, no. 1 (1986)

Caciola, Nancy, *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 2003)

Caplan, Paula J. and Cosgrove, Lisa (eds.), *Bias in Psychiatric Diagnosis* (Lanham, MD; Oxford: Jason Aronson, 2004)

Carter, Jacqueline C., Bewell, Carmen, Blackmore, Elizabeth and Woodside, D. Blake, "The Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse in Anorexia Nervosa", *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 30 (2006), pp.257-269

Cashman, Hilary *Christianity and Child Sexual Abuse* (London: SPCK, 1993)

"Catholic Church sex abuse scandals around the world", BBC News, 14 September 2010, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8576268.stm

Catholic Office for the Protection of Children and Vulnerable Adults, *National Policies for Creating a Safe Environment for Vulnerable People in the Catholic Church in England and Wales*, 2005

Church of Scotland's Forgiveness and Proportionality Working Group, *Joint Report of the Mission and Discipleship Council and Safeguarding Committee, "For of Such is the Kingdom of Heaven: Creating a Church Where All May Safely Live"*, 2009, http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0016/5083/forgiveness_proportionality_2009.pdf

Catholic Safeguarding Advisory Service, *National Policies for Creating a Safe Environment for Vulnerable People in the Catholic Church in England and Wales*, 2010, http://www.csasprocedures.uk.net/chapters/p_nat_pol_crea.html

Chervous, Jane *From Silence to Sanctuary: A Guide to Understanding, Responding to and Preventing Abuse* (London: SPCK, 2004)

Chopp, Rebecca, *The Power to Speak* (New York: Crossroad, 1989)

Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, *Time for Action: Sexual abuse, the Churches and a New Dawn for Survivors* (London: Church House Publishing, 2002)

Clegg, Christine, "Feminist Recoveries in 'My Father's House'", *Feminist Review* no.61 (1999), pp.67-82

Commission of Investigation, "Report into the Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin", 2009, http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/PB09000504

Conway, Eamonn, Duffy, Eugene, Shields, Attracta (eds.), *The Church and Child Sexual Abuse: Towards a Pastoral Response* (Dublin: Columba Press, 1999)

Cooper-White, Pamela, *The Cry of Tamar: Violence Against Women and the Church's Response* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995)

Coulter, Leah, "A Pastoral Theology for the Sinned Against: Adult Christian Women Sexually Abused as Children", *American Journal of Pastoral Counselling* 3, no.3 (2001), pp.187-205

Doan, Carrie, "'Subversive Stories and Hegemonic Tales' of Child Sexual Abuse: From Expert Legal Testimony to Television Talk Shows", International Journal of Law in Context, vol. 1, no. 3, pp. 295-309

Finkelhor, David, Browne, Ángela, Araji, Sharon, Baron, Larry, Peters, Stefanie Doyle and Wyatt, Gail Elizabeth, *Sourcebook on Child Sexual Abuse* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1984)

Finkelhor, David, *Sexually Victimized Children*, (New York: Free Press, 1979)

Fiorenza, Elisabeth Schüssler, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992)

Fiorenza, Elisabeth Schüssler, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, Second edition, (London: SCM, 1994)

Fortune, Marie Marshall and Marshall, Joretta (eds.), *Forgiveness and Abuse: Jewish and Christian Reflections* (New York: Haworth Press, 2002)

Fortune, Marie Marshall, *Sexual Violence: The Unmentionable Sin* ((New York: Pilgrim Press, 1984)

Fortune, Marie Marshall (ed.), *Violence Against Women and Children: A Christian Theological Sourcebook* (New York: Continuum, 1995)

Fortune, Marie Marshall, *Violence in the Family: A Workshop Curriculum for Clergy and Other Helpers* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1991)

Fox, Mike, "Canada strikes deal on church abuse", BBC News, 20 November 2002, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/2497199.stm

Frank, Arthur W., *The Wounded Storyteller* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997)

Fraser, Sylvia, *My Father's House: A Memoir of Incest and Healing* (London: Viagro Press, 2004)

Fulkerson, Mary McClintock, *Changing the Subject: Women's Discourses and Feminist Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001)

Gebara, Ivone, *Out of the Depths: Women's Experience of Evil and Salvation*, trans. Ann Patrick Ware (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002)

Goddard, Chris, "The Silencing of Children: The Truth is Longer than a Lie" (paper presented at conference on Sexual Abuse in Religious Contexts, Sydney, Australia, June 20-21, 2008)

Gosney, Jeanette, *Surviving Childhood Sexual Abuse: Supporting Adults in the Church* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2002)

Govier, Trudi, *Forgiveness and Revenge* (London; New York: Routledge, 2002)

Harrison, Elizabeth, "Disclosing the Details of Child Sexual Abuse: Can Imaginative Literature Help Ease the Suffering?", *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing*, vol. 18, no. 3, pp.127-134

Heggen, Carolyn Holderread, *Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes and Churches* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993)

Herman, Judith Lewis, *Trauma and Recovery* (London: Pandora, 2001)

Horton, Anne L. and Williamson, Judith A. (eds.), *Abuse and Religion: When Praying Isn't Enough* (Lexington, MS: Lexington Books, 1988)

House of Bishops, *Promoting a Safe Church: Policy for Safeguarding Adults in the Church of England* (London: Church House Publishing, 2006)

House of Bishops, *Protecting all God's Children: The Child Protection Policy for the Church of England*, 3rd edition (London: Church House Publishing, 2004)

House of Bishops, *Protecting all God's Children: The Child Protection Policy for the Church of England*, 4th edition (London: Church House Publishing, 2010)

Imbens, Annie and Jonker, Ineke, *Christianity and Incest*, trans. Patricia McVay (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992)

Ingleby, David *Critical Psychiatry: The Politics of Mental Health* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981)

Johnstone, Lucy, *Users and Abusers of Psychiatry: A Critical Look at Psychiatric Practice* (Philadelphia, PA: Routledge, 2000)

Kallendorf, Hilaire, *Exorcism and its Texts: Subjectivity in Early Modern Literatures of England and Spain*, (Toronto; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2003)

Kallstrom-Fuqua, Amanda C., Marshall, Linda L. and Weston, Rebecca, "Childhod and Adolescent Sexual Abuse of Community Women: Mediated Effects on Psychological Distress and Social Relationships", *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 72, no. 6 (2004), pp.980-992

Kapferer, Bruce"Mind, Self and Other in Demonic Illness", *American Ethnologist* 6, no. 1 (February 1979), pp.110-133

Keene, Frederick W., "Structures of Forgiveness in the New Testament" in Carol J. Adams and

Keller, Mary *The Hammer and the Flute: Women, Power and Spirit Possession* (Baltimore, MD; London: John Hopkins University Press, 2005)

Kennedy, Margaret, "Christianity and Child Sexual Abuse – Survivors Informing the Care of Children Following Abuse", paper given as part of study day on Spiritual Issues

in Child Psychiatry at Royal College of Psychiatrists, London, 2003, http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/pdf/Margaret%20Kennedy%201.11.03%20Christianity%20and%20Child%20Sexual%20Abuse%20-%20Survivors%20informing%20the%20care%20of%20children%20following%20abuse.pdf

Kennedy, Margaret, "Christianity and Child Sexual Abuse – the Survivors' Voice Leading to Change", *Child Abuse Review* 9 (2000), pp.124-141

Kennedy, Margaret, *The Courage to Tell: Christian Survivors of Sexual Abuse Tell Their Stories of Pain and Hope* (London: CTBI, 1999)

Koch, Tony, "Archbishop 'failed to act' on sex abuse" *The Australian*, November 11 2006, http://www.news.com.au/archbishop-failed-to-act-on-sex-abuse/story-e6frfkp9-1111112504293

Kreoger, Catherine Clark and Beck, James R. (eds.), *Women, Abuse, and the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker books, 1993)

Kroeger, Catherine Clark and Nason-Clark, Nancy, *No Place for Abuse: Biblical and Practical Resources to Counteract Domestic Violence* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2001)

Lampman, Lisa Barnes and Shattuck, Michelle D. (eds.), *God and the Victim: Theological Reflections on Evil, Victimization, Justice, and Forgiveness* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1999)

Leverich, Gabriele S., McElroy, Susan L., Suppes, Trisha, Keck, Paul E., Denicoff, Kirk D., Nolen, Willem A., Altshuler, Lori L., Rush, A. John, Kupka, Ralph, Frye, Mark A., Autio, Karen A. And Post, Robert M., "Early Physical and Sexual Abuse Associated with an Adverse Course of Bipolar Illness", *Biological Psychiatry*, 51 (2002), pp.288-297

McLane, Janice, "The Voice on the Skin: Self-Mutilation and Merleau Ponty's Theory of Language", *Hypatia* 11, no. 4 (1996), pp.107-118

Meade, Kevin, "Church quiet on abuse for 26 years", *The Australian*, November 7 2006, http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/nation/church-quiet-on-abuse-for-26-years/story-e6frg6nf-1111112481155

Merrill, Lex L., Thomsen, Cynthia J., Sinclair, Barbara B., Gold, Steven R. And Milner, Joel S., "Predicting the Impact of Child Sexual Abuse on Women: The Role of Abuse Severity, Parental Support, and Coping Strategies", *Journal of Counsulting and Clinical Psychology* 69, no. 6 (2001) pp.992-1006

Methodist Conference, "Tracing Rainbows Through the Rain: The Report of the *Time for Action* Monitoring Group to the Methodist Conference 2006", www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/Conf06_Safeguarding_pcfull.doc

Methodist Conference, *Safeguarding: A Methodist response to the Codes of Practice of the Home Office and Scottish Office concerning the protection of children and young people* (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 2003)

Morton, Nelle, *The Journey is Home* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985)

Mudaly, Neerosh and Goddard, Chris, *The Truth is Longer than a Lie* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2006)

Nash, Michael R., Hulsey, Timothy L., Sexton, Mark C., Harralson, Tina L., Lambert, Warren, "Long-Term Sequalae of Childhood Sexual Abuse: Perceived Family Enviornment, Psychopathology, and Dissociation", *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 61, no. 2 (1993), pp. 276-283

National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, "Sex Offenders and Sex Offences Against Children: Key Child Protection Statistics" compiled by the NSPCC Child Protection Awareness and Diversity Department in December 2007, http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/research/statistics/sex_offenders_statistics_wda48745.html.

O'Grady, Ron, *The Hidden Shame of the Church: Sexual Abuse of Children and the Church* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2001)

Parkinson, Patrick, *Child Sexual Abuse and the Churches* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1997)

Parsons, Stephen, *Ungodly Fear* (Oxford: Lion Publishing, 2000)

Patterson, Wendy, *Reading Trauma: Exploring the Relationship between Narrative and Coping*, PhD thesis, Nottingham Trent University, 2000

Pellauer, Mary D., Chester, Barbara and Boyajian, Jane (eds.), *Sexual Assault and Abuse: A Handbook for Clergy and Religious Professionals* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987)

Pembroke, Louise Roxanne, *Self Harm: Perspectives from Personal Experience* (London: Chipmunka Publishing, 1996)

Pinks, Heather, "Self-Mutilation: A Spiritual Endeavor", *The Journal of Pastoral Care and Counseling* 57, no.4 (2003), pp.447-458

Plummer, Ken, *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change, and Social Worlds*, (London; New York: Routledge, 1994)

Polusny, Melissa A. and Follette, Victoria M., "Long-term Correlates of Child Sexual Abuse: Theory and Review of the Empirical Literature" *Applied and Preventative Psychology* 4 (1995), pp.143-166

Putman, Frank W., "Ten-Year Research Update Review: Child Sexual Abuse" *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 42, no. 3 (March 2003), pp.269-278

Ramsey, Martha, *Where I Stopped: Remembering an Adolescent Rape* (San Diego; New York; London: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1995)

Reavey, Paula and Warner, Sam, "Curing Women: Child Sexual Abuse, Therapy and the Construction of Femininity", *International Journal of Critical Psychology,* vol. 3, 2001, pp.

Rieth, Sarah M., "Scriptural Reflections on Deafness and Muteness as Embodied in the Healing Journeys of Adult Survivors of Sexual Abuse", *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 3 (Summer 1993), pp.39-52

Ronai, Carol Rambo, "Multiple Reflections on Child Sexual Abuse: An Argument for a Layered Account", *Journal of Contemporary Account*, 23 (1993), pp.395-426

Russell, Letty M., *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993)

Said, Edward, "Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies, and Community" in W. J. T. Mitchell (ed.), *The Politics of Interpretation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp.

Sandford, Paula, *Healing Victims of Sexual Abuse* (Hatfield: Van Schaik, 2000)

Sebold, Alice *Lucky* (London: Picador, 2002)

Shaw, Clare and Proctor, Gillian, "Women at the Margins: A Critique of the Diagnosis of Borderline Personality Disorder", *Feminism and Psychology* 15 (2005) pp.483-488

Shaw, Jane, "Women, Rationality and Theology" in Daphne Hampson (ed.), *Swallowing a Fishbone? Feminist Theologians Debate Christianity* (London: SPCK, 1996), pp.

Silverman, Amy B., Reinherz, Helen Z. and Giaconia, Rose M., "The Long-Term Sequalae of Child and Adolescent Abuse", *Child Abuse and Neglect*. 20, no.8 (1996), pp. 709-723

Silverman, Sue William, *Because I Remember Terror, Father, I Remember You* (Athens, GA.; London: University of Georgia Press, 1999)

Steiger, H. and Zanko, M., "Sexual Traumata among Eating-Disordered, Psychiatric, and Normal Female Groups: Comparison of Prevalences and Defense Styles", *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 5 (1990), pp. 74–86

Summit, Roland, "The Child Sexual Abuse Accommodation Syndrome", *Child Abuse and Neglect* 7 (1983), pp.177-193

Surrey, Janet, Swett, Chester, Michaels, Alisa and Levin, Sarah, "Reported History of Physical and Sexual Abuse and Severity of Symptomology in Women Psychiatric Outpatients", *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 60, no. 3 (July 1990), pp.412-417

Tatman, Lucy, "The Yearning to be Whole-enough or to Feel Something, Not Nothing: A Feminist Theological Consideration of Self-mutilation as an Act of Atonement", *Feminist Theology* 17, (Jan. 1998), pp.

Trible, Phyllis, *Texts of Terror* (London: SCM Press, 2002)

Weiss, Erica L., Longhurst, James G. and Mazure, Carolyn M., "Childhood Sexual Abuse as a Risk Factor for Depression in Women: Psychosocial and Neurobiological Correlates", *American Journal of Psychiatry* 156, no. 6 (June 1999), pp.816-828

"What is Silver Ring Thing?", http://www.silverringthing.com/whatissrt.asp

Wheatley, Susan, *Handbook for Child Protection in the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh, Saint Andrews Press, 2005)

Winkler, Cathy, "Rape as Social Murder", *Anthropology Today* 7, no. 3 (June 1991), pp.12-14

Yama, Mark F., Fogas, Bruce S., Teegarden, Lisa A. And Hasting, Brian, “Childhood Sexual Abuse and Parental Alcoholism: Interactive Effects in Adult Women”, *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 63, no.2 (April 1993), pp.300-305